

SALT-RISING BREAD

Catharine Parr Traill's Female Emigrant's Guide: Cooking with a Canadian Classic

Natalie Cooke and Fiona Lucas, editors

McGill-Queen's Press, 2017

During this pandemic, many people are making bread since they have time to play in the kitchen. Flour and yeast have been flying off the shelves; in fact, yeast is now in short supply. But you don't need commercial yeast to make good bread at home. Try this recipe from the 19th-century settlers in the backwoods of Upper Canada!



Catharine Parr Traill, 1802–1899

Library Archives Canada, Traill Family Papers, C067349

Traill immigrated to Upper Canada in 1832 with her husband Thomas. They settled in the Peterborough area, first on Lake Katchewanooka and then on Rice Lake. She was a prolific story writer, novelist, columnist and botanist. Her first Canadian book was *The Backwoods of Canada* in 1836. One of her many other books was *The Female Emigrant's Guide* of 1854–55, in which she supplied detailed domestic and cooking advice to inexperienced settlers like she herself had once been. Traill and her younger sister Susanna Moodie, a fellow settler, became foundational authors in Canadian literature.

TRAILL'S TEXT FOR SALT-RISING BREAD (pages 96–7)

This sort of barm [yeast] is much used among the old Canadian and Yankee settlers. It has this advantage over other kinds of rising; it requires no addition of any other yeast to stimulate it into active fermentation. Those who are in the constant habit of using it, make excellent bread with it. I dislike the peculiar flavour it imparts, and if it is not really well managed, it is neither pleasant nor wholesome; but many persons prefer it to all other modes of fermenting bread, so I shall furnish the instructions for making it.

Take one teaspoonful of salt, one pint of warm water or new milk, rather more than blood-heat; thicken with as much flour as will make a batter the thickness of good cream; mix in a jug that will hold about a quart; set the jug in a pan or pot half filled with water, warm, but not too hot; cover your mixture close, and set it in a warm place near to the stove or fire: in about four hours bubbles will begin to rise on the surface, and in about two more the yeast will begin to rise in a fine soft creamy head. The nice point in making salt-rising bread is to know when the yeast is risen enough: after a certain time it goes down, and will not raise the bread, or turns it sour. — Experience will guide you after one or two trials. But we will suppose the yeast is risen nearly to the brim of the jug; then take as much flour, say four quarts, as will make you two loaves, or one good bake-kettle loaf; make a hole in the flour, add a little salt, and pour your barm in; mingle it thoroughly, and knead your dough smoothly and well with your hands, as you would make up any other loaf: let your bake-can be well greased before putting your loaf in; cover it with the lid. In baking in the bake-kettle, do not fill it much more than half full, that your dough may have room to swell; many a good loaf is spoiled by being crowded into too small a space. Set the pan with your loaf at a moderate distance from the fire, covered up; when it rises, which you see by its occupying a larger space, and cracking on the top, you may advance it nearer the fire, turning the bake-kettle round gradually from time to time, till every side has felt the influence of the heat. When within two inches of the top, put a scattering of coals (live wood-embers) below the kettle and on the lid; or heat the lid on the fire, but not too hot at first, and then add live coals. You must keep your kettle turned gradually, that the sides may brown, and do not put too many hot coals below at once. You will soon learn the art of baking a shanty-loaf: a little attention and care is the main thing. When the crust is hard and bears pressure without sinking in, the bread is done.

Many a beautiful loaf I have eaten, baked before a wood fire in a bake-kettle. The bush-settlers seldom can afford to buy cooking-stoves during the first few years, unless they are better off than the labouring class usually are when they come to Canada.

GLOSSARY ENTRY (page 462)

Traill's instructions on salt-rising bread in *The Backwoods of Canada* were the first published in North America,¹ even though this bread had obviously been long familiar to Yankee housewives in both the northern States and Canada. Despite being notorious temperamental, especially in winter, salt-rising was "much used among the old Canadian and Yankee settlers" although "the peculiar flavour it imparts to the bread renders it highly disagreeable to some persons," Traill included.² Ann Langton's family, however, said "the votes were in favour of it."³ After the 1836 publication of Traill's information about salt-rising, recipes appear in many nineteenth-century cookbooks, manuscript collections, newspapers, and almanacs, but by the early twentieth century had largely disappeared because packaged yeast had become readily available in the shops.

As with hop-rising, milk-rising, bran-rising, and others, the salt-risen dough relied on natural fermentation due to the presence of wild yeasts in the air and the flour, although its chemistry was not understood until the early twentieth century when the bacterium *lactobacillus* was recognized as an additional active agent. The base for salt-risen dough was cornmeal, wheat flour, or potato mash, and to ensure a light bread the sponge was mixed the night before. Writers often comment on the distinct odour and whiteness of salt-risen bread. Its texture is dense and moist, and it is an excellent vehicle for fresh butter.

OUR MODERN INSTRUCTIONS (pages 344–47)

Traill's directions for salt-risen bread read quite straightforwardly but the reality is a bit more complicated. Her facts were all correct but some subtleties were missing. She may have written the instructions down as she received them since she herself did not make this bread, as she "dislike[d] the peculiar flavour." Salt-risen bread does have a reputation for a bad smell while it is working and it can have a distinct flavour, but in our experience these are exaggerated. We have found the final loaf to be dense and moist – and delicious!

Recipes for salt-risen breads are often quite involved, but this simple wheat bread is quite possible without complications.

Advice from Historical Sources about Salt-Rising Bread

"The usual plan in this country is to mix flour with warm salt and water, and set it by the fire to rise. But it must be carefully watched, the temperature must be kept even, no easy matter in cold weather. They usually put their vessel within another closed vessel of warm water, but even then it requires great attention, for if the fermentation is too long delayed it becomes sour. Moreover, whenever the right degree of fermentation is attained, then and there you must mix your loaf at whatever inconvenient season it may happen to occur. If the operation is successful, you have very good bread, but there is great uncertainty in it."

Anne Langton, *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada*, 11 December 1837

First Bubbles



Early Morning Bubbles



"[A]fter the barm has once reached its height, unless immediately made use of, it sinks, and rises again no more. ... The water that surrounds the pot in which your rising is, must never be allowed to cool much below the original heat, more warm water being added (in the pan, not to the barm)."

Catharine Parr Traill, *The Backwoods of Canada*, 1836

"[M]ake up your [salt-risen] bread into rather a soft dough ... [T]he softer is the dough, the more light and spongy will the bread be."

Lettice Bryan, *The Kentucky Housewife*, 1839

Yield: One loaf of about 1.125 kg (2½ lb).

Start this loaf by setting the bowl of ingredients into a warm water bath in the afternoon if you want to have bread for dinner the following day. Traill and other sources suggested it takes about six hours to raise the necessary creamy head of froth, but in our experience it can take as much as fifteen to eighteen hours (probably because kitchens nowadays have far fewer ambient yeasts), so leaving it to rise overnight is a practical idea. As the dormant wild yeast spores awaken and the wet flour decomposes, they release bubbles of carbon dioxide, lactic acid, and beneficial bacteria. The key to this process is keeping the water warm so the gases can continue to develop and mingle with the natural airborne yeasts and those in the flour.⁴

After a lot of experimentation, we have found that distilled water and whole wheat flour make the best base, while finishing with white flour leads to the best texture and flavour. Municipal water has often been chlorinated or fluoridated, so using distilled water is important.

1 tsp	5 mL	sea salt
2 c	500 mL	warm distilled or spring (not tap) water or milk
2 c	500 mL	flour – whole wheat, white, or a mix (whole wheat ferments best)
3½–4c	875 mL – 1 L	flour – white, whole wheat, or a mix

Late Afternoon or Early Evening of Day One

1. Dissolve the salt in the water or milk in a quart or litre jug. Whisk in the flour.
2. "Set the jug in a pan or pot half filled with water, warm but not too hot" between 38 and 45°C (110–120°F). "Set it in a warm place," such as in an oven with a light on or on a towel-covered radiator, which maintains the water's gentle heat. Even in the summer the key is to keep the damp flour warm. Nothing will happen for hours. Don't despair! Surface bubbles will slowly emerge and "the yeast will begin to rise in a fine soft creamy head." A faint odour may be detectable.

Next Morning

3. Once the rising has developed, stir it and then pour it into a large mixing bowl. Blend in the flour, half a cup at a time, beating the batter until it is as smooth as possible. When it becomes difficult to beat, switch to blending with your hand.
4. When you have a rough ball, tip it onto a counter generously sprinkled with white flour.
5. Knead the dough well for about fifteen minutes, until you have a smooth, compact ball. Sprinkle more flour onto the counter as the ball becomes sticky while kneading. Shape the dough into a nice dome and transfer to a greased and floured baking sheet or shape it into a rectangle and transfer it to a greased and floured bread tin. Cover with a damp cloth.
6. Set it to rise in a warm place for at least two hours, but probably more like three, until it is nicely risen. It won't double in bulk as other breads do.
7. Pre-heat the oven to 230°C (450°F). Just before the loaf goes into the oven, slash the top in an X.
8. Bake for fifteen minutes, then reduce the temperature to 200°C (400°F) to mimic a brick oven and bake for a further fifteen minutes. Reduce again to 180°C (350°F) for another fifteen minutes. Check if the loaf is fully baked at the end of 45 minutes by tapping it sharply on the bottom. If it rings hollow, remove it to a rack to cool. If it sounds dull, return the loaf to the oven and check it again in ten-minute increments.



¹ William Craigie, *Dictionary of American English*, 1940, 3: 1450.

² Trill, *Backwoods*, 137.

³ Langton, *A Gentlewoman*, 10 October 1838, 180.

⁴ Elizabeth David, *English Bread and Yeast Cookery*, 1977, 299–301; J. Thompson Gill, *The Complete Bread, Cake and Cracker Baker*, 1881, 28–30; Sandra L. Oliver, "Salt Rising Bread," *Food History News*, 2001, 13(4): 3–5.

April 2020

The page numbers on this recipe sheet refer to Cooke and Lucas, *Cooking with a Canadian Classic*, 2017.

Photographs by Fiona Lucas, 2016.