

Focaccia or Large Bun Bread - simple sourdough

The Italian *focaccia* translates as a *tart, bun* or *cake* according to the dictionary, whereas I had always thought focaccia meant *hearth bread*. In any case the focaccia is remarkably similar to other ethnic breads such as scones, Moroccan bread, and Ethiopian ambasha, which are round or rectangular and made to rise to a depth of only ½ -2 inches.

This style of bread is well suited to durum wheat, emmer and soft wheat, as well as spelt and hard red wheat. Example varieties of these wheat types are Durum-Iraq, Blue Beard durum, Ethiopian emmer, Sonora, Wit Wolkoring and Foisy.

Italian focaccia is also related to ciabatta in that the dough is highly hydrated and soft. The difference comes in the handling and shaping of the dough. Good olive oil is generally added and sometimes some buttermilk, yogurt or fresh milk. The range in amount of liquid to add is wide. Eventually the amount of liquid will be according to your taste, and the nature of the flour used.

The focaccia can be simply coated in olive oil or it can be flavored with toppings of tomatoes, garlic, onion and other previously cooked vegetables, herbs, pepper and cheese just as for a deep-dish pizza. Chopped olives and herbs such as rosemary can be added to the dough. Generally when there is to be a topping the focaccia is pressed into a baking pan. It can also be shaped as a disc directly on parchment paper for ease of handling with an oven peel, onto preheated oven tiles or pizza stone; this is convenient when the focaccia is kept plain. Here I describe a good looking and enjoyable simple topping of tomato paste, dried oregano, black pepper and olive oil.

The amounts given are for one focaccia, and are small enough to be worked by hand. It is convenient to make this amount of bread in a wide Pyrex® one quart mixing jug, and to use a spurtle, which is a handily shaped smooth wooden stick, to mix the dough. Handle the dough using olive oil coated hands or alternatively well moistened hands.

The dough preparation steps have been minimized in this recipe to make it very simple and resulting in an open crumb. For a finer crumb structure and perhaps an overall lighter texture, the dough can be left in the mixing bowl until it has doubled, before proceeding with the shaping. A description of this alternative more sophisticated procedure is given at the end of the recipe below.

For one focaccia, 4-8 servings:

<i>Ingredients</i>	<i>Bakers per cent</i>	<i>Grams</i>	<i>Ounces</i>
Whole wheat flour	100	250	8
Enzyme active wheat malt*	1	2.5	0.08
Olive oil	4	10	0.32
Salt	1.5	3.8	0.12
Water	75	187.5	6
Yogurt (optional)	20	50	1.6
Simple sourdough starter*	10	25	0.8

* See recipes at www.wholegrainconnection.org. Enzyme active wheat malt is 3-4 day sprouted and dried wheat.

[] Add whole wheat flour and enzyme active malt to a mixing bowl, mix well.

[] Make a well in the flour mixture and add olive oil. Incorporate the olive oil in the flour, using the back of a fork to press the oil and flour together against the side of the bowl, until evenly mixed in.

[] Separately in a one cup sized bowl or jug, dissolve the salt in water. *Optionally add yogurt.*

[] Add sourdough starter to salty water and disperse evenly.

[] Add the mixture of salt, water, *yogurt* and starter to the flour mixture and mix together just until evenly and smoothly blended.

[] Coat a baking pan with olive oil; 8-inch square or 8-inch diameter round pan.

[] Briefly knead the dough by folding from the sides to the middle and fisting the dough down. Using oiled fingers spread the dough to fill the oiled baking pan in a layer about half an inch thick.

[] *Optionally add topping at this stage. See below**.*

[] Enclose the pan in a plastic bag or similar cover, to prevent it drying out. Leave to rise until doubled; approximately 5 hours at 80°F, 8 hours at 70°F, 12 hours at 65°F.

[] Preheat oven at 475°F at least one hour before baking. *Produce steam in the oven by placing a bread pan containing a quarter inch of water into the oven, at least 20 minutes before baking time; leave this pan in the oven to one side, during the entire baking of the bread.*

[] Use a fork to dock the surface just before placing in oven. Bake at 475°F for 10 - 15 minutes.

[] Allow to cool for a few minutes before removing from pan. *Serve either directly from the pan or remove from pan and allow to cool on a rack before slicing on a board.*

The bread is somewhat delicate at this stage so handle gently.

***Tomato and oregano focaccia topping*

<i>Ingredients</i>	<i>Amounts</i>
Tomato paste	3-6 tablespoons
Dried Oregano	1-2 teaspoons
Freshly ground black pepper	To taste
Olive oil	1-3 tablespoons

[] Using a small flexible spatula, spread a thin layer of tomato paste all over the top of the focaccia, to the edges.

[] Crush the dried oregano to a fine powder and generously sprinkle it all over the tomato paste.

[] Sprinkle surface with freshly ground black pepper, to taste.

[] For a free-standing focaccia on parchment paper, coat the edge with olive oil, using a pastry brush.

[] Drizzle olive oil in a spiral from the edge to the center and then spread it to completely cover the tomato paste, using a small flexible spatula.



For a finer, lighter texture here is an alternative procedure for making focaccia with a topping, using the same ingredients:

- [] Add whole wheat flour and enzyme active malt to a mixing bowl, mix well.
- [] Make a well in the flour mixture and add olive oil. Incorporate the olive oil in the flour, using the back of a fork to press the oil and flour together against the side of the bowl, until evenly mixed in.
- [] Separately in a one cup sized bowl or jug, dissolve the salt in water. *Optionally add yogurt.*
- [] Add sourdough starter to salty water and disperse evenly.
- [] Add the mixture of salt, water, *yogurt* and starter to the flour mixture and mix together just until evenly and smoothly blended.
- [] Press the dough into the bottom of the bowl. Cover the bowl with a plastic bag and allow to rise until double in volume; approximately 5 hours at 80°F, 8 hours at 70°F, 12 hours at 65°F.
- [] Fist the dough down to degas it. Briefly knead the dough by folding from the sides to the middle and fisting the dough down. Make a dough ball and using oiled fingers spread the dough on a sheet of parchment paper, in a layer about half an inch thick.
- [] *Optionally add topping at this stage. See above**.*
- [] Allow to rise again for almost 2 hours at warm room temperature, before baking.
- [] Preheat oven and baking tiles or pizza stone at 475°F at least one hour before baking. *Produce steam in the oven by placing a bread pan containing a quarter inch of water, into the oven at least 20 minutes before baking time; leave this pan in the oven to one side, during the entire baking of the bread.*
- [] Use a fork to dock the surface just before placing in oven. Bake at 475°F for 10 - 15 minutes.
- [] Allow to cool somewhat on a rack, before serving. *The parchment paper can be easily slipped away.*