



Proof the yeast and make a lumpy dough



To proof the yeast, dissolve it in the warm water with the sugar and flour; whisk lightly. Let the mixture sit until foamy, 5 to 10 minutes.



To make the dough, add the milk powder, cold water, flour, and salt and knead lightly.



The dough should be ugly and lumpy, which shows that it hasn't been overworked. Cover the bowl and refrigerate until the dough has doubled, 1 to 2 hours.

Photos: Holly Stewart

Flaky, Buttery Sticky Buns

Chilled croissant dough
makes these pastries better than
any cinnamon roll you've ever tasted

BY KATHLEEN STEWART

When I lived in Berkeley, California, in the late '70s, one of my favorite morning stops was a wonderful bakery called La Farine. People would line up early to buy warm, yeasty pastries, affectionately known as “morning buns,” which they usually devoured on the spot. Years later, as I was preparing to open my

own bakery, I asked Lili LeCocq, the engaging owner of La Farine, how she made these memorable treats. She replied simply, “Croissant dough. It’s just croissant dough.”

So I set myself to the task of learning to make croissant dough. The process seemed very complicated at first, but as I



Shape the softened butter into a pliable slab



Add the flour to the slightly softened butter.



Knead the flour into the butter until it's well incorporated and the mixture is smooth.



Sandwich the butter between two pieces of floured waxed paper and shape it into a 10x12-inch rectangle. Wrap the butter in plastic and chill it in the refrigerator.

Fold the chilled dough and butter into a neat package



Roll the chilled dough into an 18x12-inch rectangle on a floured surface. Unwrap the chilled butter and lay it on the upper two-thirds of the rolled dough.



Fold the lower (unbuttered) third over the center third.



Bring the upper third down over the center, as if you were folding a letter.



Tug on the corners to make an even rectangle.

became familiar with the technique, my apprehension turned to delight. I soon discovered how to make my own sticky buns that are deliciously different from the uninspired cake-like cinnamon rolls that seem to be everywhere. Now these tender, buttery morning pastries are one of Downtown Bakery's most popular items. The preparation is foolproof if you're willing to take your time and follow all the steps with care.

CROISSANT DOUGH IS YEASTED PUFF PASTRY

If you've ever made puff pastry, you'll be familiar with the technique for making croissant dough. Both are delicate doughs with many layers that are made with a series of "turns"—a process of rolling, folding, and resting—that distributes the butter into countless ultra-thin layers. Croissant dough, however, contains yeast, making it more elastic and bread-like than regular puff pastry and not quite as flaky. But the most notable difference is the distinctive yeasty flavor in the finished pastries.

To make croissant dough, you do need a block of time, but the time spent actually working the dough is minimal. Most of the time, the dough is resting. I often spread the process out over two days by making the dough the first day and letting it rise in the refrigerator overnight. The next day, I shape and bake the buns so they're ready at the time when they're most appreciated: in the morning.

BEGIN WITH TWO COMPONENTS: DOUGH AND BUTTER

The only tools you need to make this dough are a bowl, a mixing spoon, and a rolling pin. Begin by dissolving dry yeast with a little warm water, sugar, and flour, a technique known as proofing the yeast. This gives the yeast a chance to come to life and lets you see right off that it's active. Then combine nonfat milk powder, water, flour, and salt just to form a rough-looking, undermixed dough. Kneading and excessive handling will develop the gluten and make your sticky buns tough.

Roll, fold, and turn to multiply the buttery layers



Position the dough so that the short open ends are at 6 and 12 o'clock. With even pressure on the rolling pin, roll the dough until it doubles in length. Roll toward the open ends, not toward the folds.



Fold the dough in thirds as you'd fold a letter.



Rotate 90 degrees again and roll it out so that it doubles in length. Refold.



After this set of two turns, seal the dough in plastic wrap and refrigerate for 2 to 4 hours. Repeat another set of two turns, followed by a rest in the refrigerator of 2 to 4 hours, then a third set of two turns, followed by a final refrigerated rest of at least 1 hour, but preferably overnight.

For tender, flaky, more flavorful pastry, keep the dough cold. Most recipes for yeast doughs recommend finding a warm place for the dough to rise, but croissant dough needs to be kept cold. Refrigerating this dough to rise for an hour or two helps ensure that the finished pastry will be tender and have a more pronounced yeasty flavor as well.

All butter contains some water, but excess moisture interferes with the way croissant dough rises. Good-quality unsalted butter has the least amount of moisture and gives you the best buttery flavor.

Kneading a bit of flour into the butter will help absorb the excess moisture. Unfortunately, the process of adding flour to the butter softens the butter too much to use right away. Once the flour is fully incorporated, shape the butter into a

slab sandwiched between two sheets of waxed paper or plastic wrap, and chill it.

Ideally, both the dough and the butter should be between 55° and 60°F. At this temperature, the butter slab will be slightly pliable, like modeling clay, but not at all mushy. If the butter is too warm, it will be absorbed into the dough rather than remain layered between it. Butter that's too cold will break through the dough and make lumpy-looking pastry that bakes unevenly.

When the dough and butter are evenly chilled, roll the dough into a rectangle and wrap the butter in the dough, adjusting the folds and edges to make an evenly rectangular package. Then turn the package 90 degrees, roll it out again, and refold it. Each time the dough is turned and folded, the number of layers multiplies in rapid progression. After every two turns,

THE "WET TOWEL TOSS" RELAXES THE DOUGH



If the dough seems resistant to rolling, let it rest for a moment. Then gently hold the ends of the dough and flap it against the table as if you were shaking out a wet towel. This helps relax the dough so that you don't overwork it.

Roll the dough around a cinnamon filling to make sticky buns



Make the filling by mixing the sugars, cinnamon, and cloves.



The risen dough will look like a puffy pillow after a night in the refrigerator.



Put the finished dough on a floured surface. Roll it out into a rectangle 1/2-inch thick.



Sprinkle the cinnamon-sugar mixture evenly over the rolled dough.



Roll the filled dough into a tight coil, starting from a long side of the rectangle.

the dough needs to be wrapped in plastic and allowed to rest in the refrigerator for several hours. This cold rest keeps the butter from melting and oozing into the dough. It also ensures that the gluten in the dough won't be overdeveloped and that the finished pastries will be tender, not tough.

If, after resting, the dough resists rolling and shrinks rather than expands, let it sit at room temperature for a few minutes and then shake it out like a wet towel. I've found that this little shake relaxes the dough and lets me continue without much trouble.

A well-made croissant dough needs six complete turns which, including resting periods, can take as long as eight hours. After the final turn, wrap the dough loosely in plastic and let it rest in the refrigerator for at least another hour, but preferably overnight, before shaping. This is also the time to freeze the dough for future use. Defrost frozen croissant dough in the refrigerator for a day and then proceed to shape the pastries.

SHAPING AND BAKING THE BUNS

If you've chilled your dough overnight, when you open the refrigerator the next day you'll see what looks like a puffy pillow. If it has rested only a short time, the dough will look just slightly larger than when the turns were completed. The difference relates to the time the yeast had to activate. A longer rest gives the buns a more pronounced yeasty flavor.

To make the classic swirl design of these sticky buns, roll out the finished



Cut the coil into 1 1/2-inch pieces.

Use a muffin tin for a snug, round shape



Gently tug on the end of the coil and wrap it over one side of the swirl.



Tuck the pieces, wrapped end first, into a greased muffin pan. Pat the tops to be sure the dough touches the bottom of the pan.



Cover and set in a warm place to rise for 45 minutes to 1 hour. Give them a poke to test if they've risen enough. When the indentation stays put, they're ready for baking.

dough, dust it with a mixture of brown sugar and spices, roll it into a tight coil, and cut it into individual rounds. Give the buns a snug, round shape by tucking them neatly into greased muffin tins. As you put the buns into the muffin tins, press gently on the tops to be sure the dough comes firmly in contact with the bottom of the pan. Once in the oven, any space between the dough and the pan will turn into a pocket of scorching-hot air, which will quickly turn your sticky buns to cinders. If the dough becomes warm anytime as you roll or shape it, put it back in the refrigerator briefly to firm up.

The pastry needs to rise one last time—a step known as proofing the dough. Let the shaped buns rise in a warm spot: a protected corner of the kitchen or an oven that's not turned on. After 45 minutes, test the proof by lightly poking the side of the pastry with your finger. If the indentation stays put, the sticky buns are ready to bake.

As the buns bake, the sugars will melt into a marvelously gooey, spicy, not-too-sweet glaze. These buns are best eaten the same day they're made, which is rarely a problem. It's unlikely that you'll have leftovers, but if you do, they can be frozen, thawed, and warmed before serving.

Downtown Bakery's Sticky Buns

Yields 2 dozen sticky buns.

TO PROOF THE YEAST:

*½ oz. (1 Tbs. plus ¾ tsp.) active dry yeast
¾ cup warm water
4 Tbs. sugar
1 oz. (3 Tbs.) unbleached flour*



Bake at 400°F for 35 to 40 minutes. Put a piece of foil on the shelf beneath to catch any drips. If the tops start to burn during baking, cover them with foil. Turn out the pastries onto a baking sheet to cool.

FOR THE DOUGH:

*2 oz. (½ cup plus 4½ tsp.) dry nonfat milk powder
2⅓ cups cold water
2½ lb. (8 cups) unbleached flour
5 tsp. salt*

FOR THE BUTTER BLOCK:

*1½ lb. (48 Tbs.) unsalted butter, cut into 2-inch cubes, slightly softened
2 Tbs. unbleached flour (approximately)*

FOR THE FILLING:

*2 cups packed brown sugar
2 cups sugar
2 tsp. ground cinnamon
Scant ¼ tsp. ground cloves*

For the procedure, follow the photos starting on p. 70.

Kathleen Stewart runs the Downtown Bakery in Healdsburg, California, where the sticky buns continue to draw crowds. ♦



Sticky buns are best eaten the day they're made.