

Classic American Dinner Rolls

A trio of traditional shapes from a light and buttery yeast dough

BY RANDALL PRICE



Use a dough cutter to cut equal pieces. Here, the author cuts portioned dough into 36 pieces. He'll roll them into balls and then cluster these together to make cloverleaf rolls.

Cloverleaf rolls keep their shape in a muffin tin. Form the rolls by putting three balls of dough into each cup, and then let the rolls rise in the pan.



Breadmaking is one of the kitchen's miracles. Few other activities bring such satisfaction to the cook, or such pleasure to the guests. While current baking trends favor hearty, rustic breads, classic American dinner rolls can never go out of style. The warmth of a piping-hot, homemade dinner roll, topped with a cool slice of sweet butter, is a very special treat. And while specialty bakeries can sometimes create very high-quality breads, the only way you can savor soft, fresh dinner rolls is by taking the time to make them yourself. Fortunately, melt-in-your-mouth dinner rolls are easy to make from scratch. The rich dough is a delight to knead, and the forming of the basic shapes requires no special skills other than a degree of accuracy in rolling, cutting, and portioning.

ROLL DOUGH IS NOT BREAD DOUGH

I think a slightly sweet, rich, white-flour dough gives the best results. In my recipe, butter and egg yolk give richness, while whole milk and oil provide tenderness. You can use your favorite recipe for a rich dough; the shaping techniques will be the same. You don't need to work the dough as hard as you would bread dough because small rolls need less support from gluten, a protein that forms when flour comes in contact with water. Gluten develops during kneading and provides a yeast dough's "strength." This is why bread flour, which has strong gluten-forming properties, is unwelcome when making dinner rolls. All-purpose white flour gives the correct texture.

My basic recipe allows many variations. I like the nutty flavor gained by substituting a little whole-wheat flour for some of the white, and I often make these rolls using buttermilk, fresh herbs, citrus zest, a big pinch of freshly ground black pepper or another spice or—for special dinners—a few threads of steeped saffron. No matter which version you bake, timing is of great importance when serving dinner rolls. They're most fragrant and flavorful immediately after baking.

LET THE DOUGH RISE

A slow first rise gives the rolls a fine, soft crumb. If your kitchen is cool, a gas oven with a pilot light is an ideal place for the dough to rise. If you have an electric oven, let the dough rise on a rack above a shallow pan of very hot water.

If it's more convenient, you can refrigerate the dough overnight for the initial rise, and then shape it and bake it when it suits your schedule. A refrigerator rise can be extended for as long as four days because the cool air slows the yeast. Just use a bowl that provides plenty of room for the dough's growth, and keep an eye on the dough to make



sure it doesn't spill over as it expands. If the dough threatens to overflow, give it a poke to make it deflate. Also, be sure to grease the bowl with oil or vegetable spray rather than butter. Butter will harden and not keep the dough's surface moist. Allow the dough to begin its rise for about 20 minutes at room temperature before refrigerating. Before you shape the rolls, allow refrigerated dough to sit at room temperature for half an hour before you punch it down.

PUNCH THEN SHAPE

Despite its title, punching down dough is not a violent act. Gently deflate the risen dough by sliding both hands under the dough and bringing the sides over and into the center of the dough. Then invert the dough so the bottom faces up. Let

Turn layers of dough into fantan rolls. Roll out the dough, butter it, and cut it into six even strips. Stack the strips on top of one another, and then cut the layers into pieces (top photo). Arrange the dough in muffin tins, cut edges facing upward, so the layers fan out.

A chopstick makes the indentation for a Parker House roll. After the dough has been rolled out and cut into circles, make an indentation across the roll at about the one-third mark. Then brush a little butter down the roll's center and fold the smaller part of the roll over the larger.



the dough rest for five minutes before you shape it. Precision in shaping rolls is important, but don't worry if the shapes aren't perfect; inaccuracies even out during rising and baking. A muffin tin is essential for containing the cloverleaf and fantan rolls' shapes and helping their layers bond. Parker House rolls should be placed, edges touching, in a pan (I use a 9x13-inch casserole dish).

To begin the second rising, cover the shaped rolls with plastic wrap. Then put the pan in a turned-off oven with a pan of hot water beneath the rolls' rack,

or in a gas oven with a pilot light. Take special care to avoid drafts during the second rising. The rolls should nearly double in volume in about 40 to 50 minutes.

Before I put my rolls in the oven, I like to brush them with an egg glaze (one egg yolk beaten with a pinch of sugar and a tablespoon of milk) to give them a deep, golden sheen. They also may be brushed with milk for a dark, shiny effect, or with melted butter for a soft and shiny crust. For an especially soft crust, brush the rolls again with butter as soon as they come out of the oven.

BASIC RICH WHITE DOUGH

This recipe makes a soft and buttery dough and is easily doubled. *Yields 12 dinner rolls.*

- 1 package dry yeast
- ¼ cup warm water (100° to 110°F)
- ¼ cup sugar
- ¾ cup milk
- 6 Tbs. butter
- 1 lb. (3½ cups) all-purpose flour
- 2 Tbs. vegetable oil
- 1 egg, lightly beaten
- 1 tsp. salt
- 3 Tbs. butter, melted (for shaping)

MAKING THE DOUGH

Sprinkle the yeast over the warm water. Add a pinch of the sugar. Stir and let the mixture sit until it's foamy, about 5 min. (If the mixture doesn't foam, the yeast may be inactive. Throw out the mixture and begin again with new yeast.)

Heat the milk and butter just until the butter melts. Let the mixture cool until it's tepid.

Measure the flour into a large bowl and make a well in the center. Pour in the tepid milk and the yeast mixture. Add the rest of the sugar and the oil, egg, and salt. Mix the ingredients thoroughly, gradually drawing in the flour to form a soft dough. Turn the dough onto a lightly floured work surface.

(For a variation, make whole-wheat rolls with orange and coriander. Orange zest makes these rolls particularly fragrant, and the whole-wheat flour gives the rolls a pleasantly hearty flavor. Use the recipe above, but substitute ½ cup of whole-wheat flour for ½ cup of the white flour. After the salt is added, add the grated zest of 1 orange and ½ tsp. ground coriander. Proceed with the remainder of the recipe as written.)

Knead the dough—Push the dough away from you with the heels of your hands, then fold the dough over itself and give it a quarter turn. Repeat this pushing, folding, and turning, adding only enough flour to keep the dough from sticking to the table, until the dough is smooth and elastic, about 5 min. The dough will be softer than ordinary bread dough. Put the dough in a greased bowl and then turn the dough over so the greased side faces up. Press plastic wrap onto the surface of the dough and leave it to rise until doubled in volume, 45 min. to 1 hour. Gently punch down the dough and then let it rest for 5 min. before shaping.

SHAPING THE ROLLS

Parker House rolls—Lightly butter a 9x13-in. pan. With a rolling pin, roll the dough on a lightly floured surface to a

thickness of about 1/2 in. Use a floured biscuit cutter or drinking glass to cut the dough into 2 1/2- to 3-in. rounds. Gather the dough scraps and gently press them together. Roll and cut the remaining dough.

Imagine each roll divided into thirds by two horizontal lines. Gently press a chopstick or the handle of a wooden spoon into one of these lines to make an indentation (see top photo at left)—don't press all the way through. Brush a little melted butter on the center of the roll, fold the smaller part over the larger, and press firmly with your finger to seal. Put the rolls, sides touching, in the pan. Allow to rise for 40 to 50 min., or until doubled in volume.

Cloverleaf rolls—Lightly butter a standard 12-portion muffin tin. With your hands, roll the dough into a long cylinder about 18 in. long. Use a dough cutter to divide this in half and then cut each half into six equal portions. Divide each of these 12 portions into three sections for a total of 36 pieces. Each piece should be approximately the same size.

With your palms, lightly roll each piece of dough into a smooth ball. Cluster three balls of dough in each cup of the muffin tin. Brush with a little melted butter. Allow to rise for 40 to 50 min., or until doubled in volume.

Fantans—Lightly butter a standard 12-portion muffin tin. With a rolling pin, roll the dough on a lightly floured surface into a 14x18-in. rectangle that's about 1/8 in. thick. Brush the surface of the rectangle with melted butter. Cut the rectangle in half lengthwise and then cut each half into

three long, equal strips. Stack the six layers and press together lightly (see top photo on p. 25). With a very sharp knife, cut the long strip in half and then cut each half into six equal sections. Put each section into a cup of the muffin tin, cut edges facing up. Brush with a little melted butter. Allow to rise for 40 to 50 min., or until doubled in volume.

BAKING THE ROLLS

Heat the oven to 375°F. Brush the rolls with egg glaze if desired (see recipe below) and bake for 12 to 15 min. The rolls will be evenly colored when done and should sound hollow when tapped on the bottom. Serve them at once.

EGG GLAZE

This glaze gives the rolls a golden sheen.

1 egg yolk
1 Tbs. milk
Pinch sugar

Beat all the ingredients together. Brush the glaze on the rolls just before baking.

Randall Price, from Middletown, Ohio, received the grand diplôme from La Varenne Cooking School in Paris in 1988. He was the chef to the American ambassador in Budapest for three years before returning to Paris, where he works as a private chef. ♦

Dinner rolls don't keep, so make them from scratch and serve them from the oven. This is the best way to appreciate their tender crumb and crunchy crust.



Photo: Dana Harris