

Two traditions entwined in a stollen challah

BY TAMI ISAACS PEARCE

► I am very much in favour of blending and bending tradition, so every winter-holiday season we make this warmly spiced and bejewelled stollen challah for our customers at Karma Bread. It has the light moistness of our challah and that luxurious aromatic spiced fruit of the traditional stollen. My recipe takes some advance preparation, as at Karma Bread everything is made from scratch. You can omit some steps and use shop-bought marzipan if you wish. If you are a regular challah maker, you should stride through this recipe with ease. Either way, read and read again, as advance planning and organisation are required... and it is well worth it.

INGREDIENTS

500g strong white bread flour
10g salt
10g dried yeast (one and a half sachets)

100g infused sugar
300g raisins, craisins, sultanas, dried cherries (soaked overnight in hot water)
1 tsp mixed spice
1 medium whole egg
1 egg yolk
60ml sunflower oil
200ml warm water
For the infused sugar:
500g caster sugar
Zest of one unwaxed lemon
Zest of one unwaxed orange
A vanilla pod
A few stars of anise
For home-made creamed almonds/marzipan:
150g ground almonds
150g infused sugar
Zest of one unwaxed lemon
50ml water
1 egg yolk
To decorate your challah:
A sprinkling of pearl sugar, almond flakes
A dusting of icing sugar
1 egg white for the egg-wash



This dark gold challah contains fruit and creamed almonds



TWO WEEKS IN ADVANCE

Infuse your sugar. Fill a large jar with a bag of caster sugar and the zest of one orange and one lemon. Scrape out those little black seeds of a vanilla bean pod and mix through the sugar. Throw in the pod and a

few stars of anise. Seal your jar, put in the fridge and leave the sugar to infuse these beautiful flavours. You can always keep some handy to use in your baking. Allow to come to room temperature before using.

A WEEK IN ADVANCE

Prepare your creamed almonds. Mix 150g ground almonds with 150g of your infused sugar and the zest of one unwaxed lemon. Slowly add about 50ml of water, blending all together into a smooth paste. Keep this in the fridge for at least a week, but bring it out the night before baking.

THE NIGHT BEFORE BAKING

Soak your fruit by covering in hot water and leave to absorb. Dry off any excess water with a paper towel before using. Sprinkle on the mixed spice and mix.

TO MAKE STOLLEN CHALLAH METHOD

- Weigh up all your dry ingredients accurately on a digital scale into a bowl. How wonderful does your infused sugar smell! Rub them together with your fingers to get any lumps out and mixed all dry ingredients together with your hand for an even distribution.
- Make a well in the centre and add your wet ingredients (leaving the fruit out) with the water going in slowly, keeping a little back.
- Start to mix the wet ingredients into the dry, cupping your hand and scraping from the outside of the bowl inwards. Combine as you go and start to notice as your dough begins to form, bringing all the mixture from the sides and bottom of your bowl. Knead, squeeze and push and, if the dough feels dry, add the rest of the water, drop by drop. The consistency should be moist, pliable and a little sticky.
- Turn your dough out on to your kneading surface and, using a dough scraper or spatula, scrape your bowl clean. Start to work your dough with the heel of your hands, stretching the dough away from you and bringing it back. Scrape your surface clean if you need to. Keep kneading, breathing and enjoying. Focus on the stretching and bringing back, as your dough becomes smooth and elastic.
- After a good ten minutes of kneading, bring your dough into a ball, return to the bowl and cover well with cling film. Put somewhere warm to prove for about 40 minutes.
- After that time, your dough should have

risen nicely and you are going to add your fruit. Push the air out of the dough and fold in the spiced fruit, folding the dough over and over again.

- Cover your dough again and let it prove in a warm place for another 20 minutes. At this point, you can pre-heat your oven to 220 degrees. Line your tray with greaseproof paper and beat the remaining egg whites in bowl (you will use this for glazing).
- Get your creamed almond and beat in the egg yolk. This will bind and loosen up the paste into a workable consistency. Separate the paste into three equal amounts and put to the side.
- Your dough should have bloomed again, although not so fully with the fruit inside. Turn it out on to your workspace and give it a little knead again, to make sure all the fruit is incorporated. Split into three equal amounts.
- Each piece should be rolled equally into a long sausage. It is handy at this point to use a flour-dusted rolling pin and roll out each piece into a long flattened strip about the length of an A4 piece of paper.
- Put your first strip of dough in front of you horizontally and, with a third of your almond paste, place chunks along the middle. Using the edge of dough furthest away from you, roll it towards you, encasing the almond filling in a firm strand. Seal the seam and taper the ends with your hands.
- When you have three equal strands, pinch the ends together and plait as neatly as you can, finishing with another pinch to complete. Bring the ends of the plait together and join in a circle.
- Place your crown on a baking tray and cover with a damp tea towel for 40 minutes.
- Your plaited crown should have proved nicely. Egg-wash thoroughly using a pastry brush and sprinkle liberally with flaked almond and pearl sugar.
- Place towards the bottom of the oven and bake for around 25 to 30 minutes. Your kitchen should start to smell heavenly.
- After 20 minutes, your challah should be turning a beautiful golden brown but this does not mean it is baked. To prevent over-browning, carefully slide a piece of baking paper to rest on your loaf. Leave for another ten minutes until the underside has turned a dark golden brown.
- Cool your stollen challah crown completely on a wire rack before devouring. A wonderfully luxurious addition to any winter feast.

For the Challah Queen masterclass, contact tami@karmabread.co.uk