

EASY CHALLAH

Susan Barocas

Makes 2 large or 3 smaller loaves. Can easily be doubled.

1 envelope (.25-ounce) or 1 ½ teaspoon active dry yeast, fast-acting best

¼ cup sugar

1 cup warm water (about 102 degrees F)

¼ cup safflower or other good vegetable oil + 1 teaspoon for oiling bowl

½ cup honey

1 teaspoon salt

3 eggs beaten + 1 egg

4-5 cups bread flour, plus more for kneading

Optional: sesame seeds, poppy seeds, everything seasoning, cinnamon-sugar, zatar, chopped apples or dates, raisins

In a large bowl, stir the yeast and about half the sugar into the warm water. Let stand a few minutes so yeast can start to bubble. Beat in the rest of the sugar, oil, honey, salt, 3 beaten eggs and blend well.

Using a wooden spoon, mix in the flour, 1 cupful at a time until the dough is sticky, but holds together. After the second cup you should be able to mix vigorously to get rid of any lumps of flour. Once the mixture is smooth, you can add raisins or chopped fruit and then continue adding flour.

When the dough holds together but is still a bit sticky, turn it out onto a floured surface. Sprinkle the dough and the surface with more flour only as needed while you knead the dough about 10 minutes until it's smooth, elastic and not sticky. What matters is achieving a lovely smooth, soft feel to the dough.

Coat the bottom and sides of a clean bowl with 1 teaspoon oil. Form the challah dough into a compact rounded mound, and place in the oiled bowl. Turn the dough over in the bowl to oil its surface, then cover the bowl with a clean cloth or plastic wrap, and let rise in a warm area until the dough is puffy and on its way to doubling in size, 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Cut the dough into equal-sized pieces to make ropes, 6 pieces for 2 three-braid challahs or 9 equal pieces to make 3 small loaves. Working on a floured surface, roll and stretch the dough pieces into ropes about 1 ½ inches wide (about the thickness of your thumb) and about 12 inches long for large and medium sizes, about 6 inches for small. Ropes work best if a little fatter in the middle and thinner at the ends. If the dough is resisting shaping too much, let it rest a few minutes.

Securely pinch 3 ropes together at the top and spread out the ropes from there. Starting with the strand to the right, move it to the left over the middle strand. That strand becomes the new middle strand. Take the strand farthest to the left, and move it over the new middle strand. Braiding very close together so to make a "tight" braid. Continue braiding, alternating sides each time, until the end of the ropes. Pinch the 3 ends together and tuck both ends underneath the loaf. At this point, you can gently push the tucked ends towards the middle to make sure the loaf is tight or, for a round challah, wrap the braided loaf into a circle and pinch the two ends together, then tucking them under the loaf. Repeat with the remaining rope doughs.

Place the braided loaves with space around each on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper, and completely, but lightly, brush the tops with the additional beaten egg. If desired, decorate with sesame seeds, poppy seeds, everything seasoning, cinnamon sugar or zatar.

Bake the challahs in the preheated oven 30 to 35 minutes until the top browns to a rich golden color and each loaf sounds hollow when you tap it underneath. Cool on a wire rack. When cool, can be wrapped in foil, then plastic wrap or put into a freezer bag and frozen. To use, take off plastic. Preheat oven to 350. If bread is defrosted, reheat about 10 minutes. If frozen, reheat 20-25 minutes. For a crisper crust, remove the foil for the last couple of minutes.