

Challah

Challah, the braided Sabbath bread of Judaism, is a European celebratory loaf symbolic of God's goodness and bounty. The braids traditionally separate the loaf into twelve distinct sections representing the twelve tribes of Israel. The use of eggs in the bread was probably a way to use up excess eggs before the strict Judaic Sabbath day of rest made it impossible to harvest the new eggs, as harvesting is one of many activities considered work in Orthodox Jewish communities.

I've made challah many different ways, but this is a great formula that produces a soft golden loaf, radiant when brought to the table. The key to a beautiful challah, one that stops conversation and holds everyone's attention, is to braid it so that it is tapered at the ends and plump in the middle.

**Makes 1 large braided loaf, 2 smaller loaves,
or 1 large double-braided celebration loaf**

4 cups	(18 ounces)	unbleached bread flour
2 tablespoons	(1 ounce)	granulated sugar
1 teaspoon	(.25 ounce)	salt
1 ¹ / ₃ teaspoons	(.15 ounce)	instant yeast
2 tablespoons	(1 ounce)	vegetable oil
2 large	(3.3 ounces)	eggs, slightly beaten
2 large	(1.25 ounces)	egg yolks, slightly beaten
3/4 cup plus 2 table- spoons to 1 ¹ / ₈ cups	(7 to 9 ounces)	water, at room temperature
2 egg whites, whisked until frothy, for egg wash		
Sesame or poppy seeds for garnish		

1. **Stir together the flour, sugar, salt, and yeast** in a mixing bowl (or in the bowl of an electric mixer). In a separate bowl, whisk together the oil, eggs and yolks, and 3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons water. Pour the egg mixture into the flour mixture. Mix with a spoon (or on low speed with the paddle attachment) until all the ingredients gather and form a ball. Add the remaining water, if needed.
2. **Sprinkle flour on the counter**, transfer the dough to the counter, and knead for about 10 minutes (or mix at medium-low speed for 6 minutes with the dough hook), sprinkling in more

BREAD PROFILE:

Enriched, standard dough; direct method; commercial yeast

DAYS TO MAKE: 1

10 to 15 minutes mixing; 3¹/₂ hours fermentation, shaping, and proofing; 20 to 45 minutes baking, depending on size

COMMENTARY

A double-braided celebration or festival challah is often made for weddings and Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. This double-decker version, with a smaller braid laminated to the top of the larger loaf, makes a very dramatic centerpiece.

One of the people who tested this recipe, Ellen Fenster, reminded me that the braided dough also can be curled into a round loaf, especially for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. The round shape symbolizes that the world has no beginning and no end; the three strands symbolize truth, peace, and beauty; and the spiral coil indicates the ascent to God. It is also customary to sweeten the loaf with additional sugar (you can double it) as a sign of beginning the New Year in a sweet way. Ellen told me that garnishing the loaves with seeds, such as poppy or sesame, symbolizes the falling of manna from heaven, and the covering of the challah with a cloth as it is served at the Sabbath meal represents the heavenly dew that protects the manna. Thank you, Ellen!

BAKER'S PERCENTAGE FORMULA

Challah	%
Bread flour	100
Sugar	5.5
Salt	1.4
Instant yeast	.85
Oil	5.5
Eggs	18
Egg yolks	7
Water (approx.)	45
Total	183.25

flour if needed to make a soft, supple, but not sticky dough. The dough should pass the windowpane test (page 58) and register approximately 80°F.

- 3. Lightly oil a large bowl.** Form the dough into a *boule*, as shown on page 72, and transfer into the bowl, rolling it around to coat it with oil. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap. Ferment for 1 hour at room temperature.
- 4. Remove the dough from the bowl and knead** for 2 minutes to degas. Re-form it into a ball, return the ball to the bowl, cover with plastic wrap, and ferment for an additional hour. It should be at least 1½ times its original size.
- 5. Remove the dough from the bowl and divide it** into 3 equal pieces for 1 large loaf, or 6 pieces for 2 loaves. (Or, for a celebration challah, divide it into 3 equal pieces and combine 2 of those pieces and form them into 1 large dough. Take this larger piece and divide it into 3 equal pieces. Take the smaller dough and divide it into 3 pieces as well; in the end, you will have 3 large pieces and 3 small pieces.) Regardless of the size of the loaves you decide to make, form each of the pieces into a *boule*, as shown on page 72, cover them with a towel, and let them rest on the counter for 10 minutes.
- 6. Roll out the pieces into strands**, each the same length, thicker in the middle and slightly tapered toward the ends. Braid them using the 3-braid method shown on page 84. (If making the celebration challah, lay the smaller braid on top of the larger braid, gently pressing the smaller braid onto the larger to adhere.) Line a sheet pan with baking parchment and transfer the loaf or loaves to the pan. Brush the loaves with the egg wash. Mist the loaves with spray oil and cover loosely with plastic wrap or place the pan in a food-grade plastic bag.
- 7. Proof at room temperature for 60 to 75 minutes**, or until the dough has grown to 1½ times its original size.
- 8. Preheat the oven to 350°F** (325°F for the celebration challah) with the oven rack on the middle shelf. Brush again with egg wash and sprinkle sesame seeds on top.
- 9. Bake for 20 minutes.** Rotate the pan 180 degrees and continue baking for 20 to 45 minutes, depending on the size of the loaf. The bread should be a rich golden brown and register 190°F in the center.
- 10. When done, transfer the bread to a rack** and cool for at least 1 hour before slicing or serving.