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Crispy Roasted Garlic and Parmesan Pot Bread

Infused with fresh, roasted garlic and punched up with a little Parmesan, this is a whole different animal from the typical commercial loaf peppered with garlic salt. The flavor of the roasted herb is much more subtle, earthy, and appetizing. And the cheese gives the bread a beautiful golden hue, crisp crust, and characteristic Parmesan aroma. Be sure that both the garlic and cheese are fresh and of good quality as they are what makes (or breaks) this bread. Even if you love garlic, curb the impulse to add extra; too much of it can inhibit the yeast growth.

If you're a fan of pesto, you can add a couple tablespoons to the dough for a handsome, basil-flecked bread; see the variation at the end. Home-made pesto is best, but a high-quality commercial pesto will suffice.

The bread is lovely cut into thick slices and served with a bowl of minestrone, spaghetti, or any other Mediterranean-style dish or meal. The slices are also good grilled or toasted and used for crostini. Top with an eggplant or olive oil spread for a memorable munchie even vegetarians can enjoy.

Yield: 1 large loaf, 12 to 14 portions or slices.

KS (Kneadlessly Simple) Quotient: Easy, Few ingredients, added all at once. No shaping required.

1 large head (knob) garlic
1 tablespoon good-quality olive oil, plus more for brushing dough
1/4 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese, plus 2 tablespoons for garnish
4 cups (20 ounces) unbleached all-purpose white flour or white bread flour, plus more as needed
Scant 2 teaspoons table salt
1-1/4 teaspoons instant, fast-rising, or bread machine yeast
2 cups plus 2 tablespoons ice water, plus more if needed

Preliminaries: Peel off and discard the papery outer skin from the garlic but do not separate or pull off the cloves. Cut across the pointed tops of the cloves to expose the flesh inside; discard the cut-off portion. Put 1 tablespoon of olive oil in a small ovenproof custard cup or small bowl. Dip the cut side of the garlic into the oil to coat the cloves, then turn the head cut-side up and set in the cup. Cover the cup with foil. Bake in a preheated 350°F oven for 25 to 45 minutes, or until the garlic is very soft and fragrant. Let cool, then squeeze or scrape out the garlic from the cloves into a medium bowl. Add 1/4 cup of Parmesan and thoroughly mash with a fork until the mixture forms a paste. The paste may be made several days ahead and refrigerated; let warm up slightly and stir before using.



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Crispy Roasted Garlic and Parmesan Pot Bread, continued

First Rise: In a large bowl, thoroughly stir together the flour, sugar, salt, and yeast. Vigorously stir the water and the garlic mixture into the bowl, scraping down the sides and mixing until the ingredients are thoroughly blended. If the mixture is too dry to incorporate all the flour, a bit at a time, stir in just enough more water to blend the ingredients; don't over-moisten, as the dough should be very stiff. If necessary, stir in enough more flour to stiffen it. Brush or spray the top with olive oil. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap. If desired, for best flavor or for convenience, you can refrigerate the dough for 3 to 10 hours. Then let rise at cool room temperature for 12 to 18 hours. If convenient, vigorously stir the dough once part way through the rise.

Second Rise: Using an oiled rubber spatula, lift and fold the dough in towards the center, working all the way around, avoiding deflating as much as possible. Brush or spray with olive oil. Re-cover with nonstick spray-coated plastic wrap.

Let Rise Using Any of These Methods: For a 1-1/2 to 2-1/2-hour regular rise, let stand at warm room temperature; for a 1- to 2-hour accelerated rise, let stand in a turned off microwave along with 1 cup of boiling-hot water; or for an extended rise, refrigerate for 4 to 24 hours, then set out at room temperature. Continue the rise until the dough doubles from the deflated size, removing the plastic if the dough nears it.

Baking Preliminaries: 20 minutes before baking time, put a rack in the lower third of the oven; preheat to 450°F. Oil the inside of a 3- to 4-quart (or slightly larger) Dutch oven or heavy metal pot. Heat it in the oven until it just starts to smoke, then remove it (use oven mitts). Taking care not to deflate the dough, loosen it from the bowl sides with an oiled rubber spatula and gently invert it into the pot. Don't worry if it's lopsided and ragged-looking; it will even out during baking. Spritz or brush the top with water, then sprinkle over 2 tablespoons of Parmesan. Immediately top with the lid. Shake the pot back and forth to center and even out the dough.

Baking: Reduce the heat to 425°F. Bake on the lower rack for 45 to 50 minutes. If the loaf is golden brown, continue baking, covered, for 10 to 15 minutes longer, until the top is well browned and a skewer inserted in the thickest part comes out with just a few crumbs on the tip (or until the center registers 207° to 208°F on an instant-read thermometer.) If the loaf top looks pale after the initial 45 to 50 minutes, uncover and continue baking for 10 to 15 minutes until golden brown. Then bake for 5 to 10 minutes longer to ensure the center is baked through. Cool in the pot on a wire rack for 10 to 15 minutes. Run a table knife around the loaf to loosen it. Transfer it to the rack; cool thoroughly.



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Serving and Storing: The loaf tastes good warm but will cut much better when cool. Cool completely before storing. To maintain the crisp crust, store draped with a clean tea towel or in a heavy paper bag. Or store air-tight in a plastic bag or wrapped in foil: The crust will soften, but can be crisped by heating the loaf, uncovered, in a 400°F oven for a few minutes. The bread will keep at room temperature for up to 3 days, and may be frozen, airtight for up to 2 months.

Variation: Crispy Roasted Garlic-Pesto Pot Bread – After mashing the garlic and the Parmesan into a paste, mix in 3 tablespoons homemade or commercial pesto until well blended. Proceed exactly as for the original bread.