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Raisin Swirl Bread

(Makes 1 loaf)

Here's my favorite raisin bread, a soft, tender-crumbed, sweet milk bread with delicate swirls of cinnamon sugar and lots of raisins. It makes super toast and spectacular French toast, and it makes waking up on school days a lot more fun.

While I make the dough for this bread in a mixer using a paddle and then a dough hook, it can be done by hand -- you'll need a big mixing bowl, a sturdy wooden spoon and some elbow grease.

FOR THE BREAD:

1 packet active dry yeast
1/4 cup sugar, plus a pinch
1-1/4 cups just-warm-to-the-touch whole milk
1/2 stick (4 tablespoons) unsalted butter, at room temperature
3/4 teaspoon salt
1 large egg
1/4 teaspoon pure vanilla extract (optional)
Grated zest of 1/2 orange (optional)
Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg (optional)
3-3/4 to 4 cups all-purpose flour

FOR THE SWIRL:

1 tablespoon sugar
2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
2 teaspoons unsweetened cocoa powder (optional)
1 cup moist plump raisins (dark or golden)
3 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened to a spreadable consistency

TO MAKE THE BREAD: Put the yeast in a small bowl, toss in the pinch of sugar and stir in 1/4 cup of the warm milk. Let rest for 3 minutes, then stir -- the yeast may not have dissolved completely and it may not have bubbled, but it should be soft.

Working with a stand mixer preferably fitted with a paddle attachment, combine the remaining 1 cup of milk, the butter and the remaining 1/4 cup sugar and mix on low speed for a minute or two. Add the salt, egg, and vanilla, if you are using it, as well as the zest and nutmeg, if you're using them and mix for a minute. In all likelihood, the mixture will look unpleasantly curdly (it will look even worse when you add the yeast). Add the yeast mixture and beat on medium-low speed for 1 minute more.

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Turn the mixer off and add 2-3/4 cups of the flour. Mix on low speed just until you work the flour into the liquids – you'll have a sticky mix. If you've got a dough hook, switch to it now. Add another 1 cup flour, increase the mixer speed to medium and beat the dough for a couple of minutes. If the dough does not come together and almost clean the sides of the bowl, add up to 1/4 cup more flour, 1 tablespoon at a time. Keep the mixer speed at medium and knead the dough for about 3 minutes, or until it is smooth and has a lovely buttery sheen. The dough will be very soft, much too soft to knead by hand.

Butter a large bowl, turn the dough into the bowl, and cover the bowl tightly with plastic wrap. Put the bowl in a warm place and let the dough rise until it is doubled in size, about 1-1/2 hours.

Scrape the dough onto a large piece of plastic wrap, wrap it and put it in the freezer for 30 minutes to firm up -- enough to be rolled easily. (At this point, you can instead refrigerate the dough overnight if that is more convenient).

TO MAKE THE SWIRL AND SHAPE THE LOAF:

Butter a 9 x 5-inch loaf pan. Whisk together the sugar, cinnamon and cocoa, if you're using it. Check that the raisins are nice and moist; if they're not, steam them for a minute, then dry them well.

Put the dough on a large work surface lightly dusted with flour, lightly dust the top of the dough and roll the dough into a rectangle about 12 x 18 inches.

Gently smear 2 tablespoons of the butter over the surface of the dough – this is most easily done with your fingers. Sprinkle over the sugar mixture and scatter over the raisins. Starting from a short side of the dough, roll the dough up jelly-roll fashion, making sure to roll the dough snugly. Fit the dough into the buttered pan, seam side down, and tuck the ends under the loaf.

Cover the pan loosely with wax paper and set in a warm place; let the dough rise until it comes just a little above the edge of the pan, about 45 minutes.

GETTING READY TO BAKE:

When the dough has almost fully risen, center a rack in the oven and preheat the oven to 375 degrees F. Line a baking sheet with parchment or a silicone mat.

Melt the remaining tablespoon of butter, and brush the top of the loaf with the butter. Put the pan on the baking sheet and bake the bread for about 20 minutes. Cover loosely with a foil tent and bake for another 25 minutes or so, until the bread is golden and sounds hollow when the bottom of the pan is tapped. Transfer the pan to a rack and cool for 5 minutes, then unmold. Invert the bread and cool to room temperature right side up on the rack.

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SERVING:

While this bread is good just sliced and buttered, it is great toasted. Toasting brings out the sweetness of the loaf and heightens the play between the slightly firm exterior and the soft inside. I also love the bread toasted, buttered and sprinkled with cinnamon sugar or spread with a good thick layer of apricot or black cherry jam.

STORING:

Wrapped in plastic wrap, the loaf will keep at room temperature for about 3 days; wrapped airtight, it will keep in the freezer for up to 2 months.