

From Marie – July 2013 W1 (July 8)

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Mantovana – Olive Oil Bread

From: [Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking, by Marcella Hazan](#)

If you follow the eastern-bound course of the Po river, Italy's largest, as it slices much of northern Italy in two, with parts of Lombardy and the Veneto on its left bank, and Emilia-Romagna on its right, you will be traveling across some of the country's best bread territory, once studded with flour mills powered by the river's currents.

These handsome loaves, notable for their fine, crisp, tasty crust and soft crumb take their name from the ancient ducal town of Mantua, in Lombardy.

Makes 2 loaves

- 2 teaspoons active dry yeast
 - 2 cups lukewarm water
 - ¼ teaspoon sugar
 - About 5 cups unbleached flour
 - 2 teaspoons salt
 - 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
 - A baking stone
 - A baker's peel (paddle), 16 by 14 inches, or a cookie sheet
 - Cornmeal
 - A pastry brush
1. Dissolve the yeast completely in a large bowl by stirring it into ¼ cup lukewarm water with the ¼ teaspoon sugar added. When dissolved, in 10 minutes or less, add 2 cups flour and ¾ cup water, and mix thoroughly with a wooden spoon.
 2. *If kneading by hand:* Pour the contents of the bowl onto a lightly floured work surface, and knead steadily for about 10 minutes. Push forward against the dough, using the heel of your palm and keeping your fingers bent. Fold the mass in half, giving it a quarter turn, press hard against it with the heel of your palm again, and repeat the operation. Make sure that you keep turning the ball of dough always in the same direction, either clockwise or counterclockwise, as you prefer. Add a little more flour, if you find it necessary to make the dough workable, and dust your hands with flour if they stick to the dough. Knead until the dough is no longer sticky, but smooth and elastic. It should spring back when poked with a finger. Shape it into a ball.
If using the food processor: Pour 2 cups flour into the processor bowl, with the steel blade running add the dissolved yeast gradually, together with ¾ cup water. When the dough comes together forming a lump on the blades, take it out and finish kneading it by hand for 1 or 2 minutes.
 3. Choose an ample bowl, dust the inside lightly with flour, and put in the dough. Wring out a wet cloth towel, fold it in two, and cover the bowl with it. Place the bowl in a warm, draft-free place, and let it rest for about 3 hours, until it has doubled in bulk.
 4. *If kneading by hand:* Pour the remaining 3 cups flour onto the work surface. Place the risen ball of dough over the flour, punching it down and opening it with your hands. Pour the remaining 1 cup lukewarm water over it, and add the salt and the olive oil. Knead steadily as described above.
If using the food processor: Pour the remaining flour into the processor's bowl. Put in the risen dough, and the salt, and gradually add first the 1 cup lukewarm water, then the salt and the olive oil, while running the steel blades. Take out the dough when it forms a lump on the blades, and finish kneading it by hand for 1 or 2 minutes.
 5. Return the kneaded dough to the floured bowl, cover it with a damp towel, and let it rest until it has doubled in bulk again, about 3 more hours.
 6. Thirty or more minutes before you are ready to bake, input the baking stone in the oven and preheat oven to 450.

7. When the dough has again risen to double its bulk, take the dough out of the bowl, and slap it down very hard several times, until it is stretched out lengthwise. Reach for the far end of the dough, fold it a short distance toward you, push it away with the heel of your palm, flexing your wrist, fold it, and push it away again, gradually rolling it up and bringing it close to you. It will have a tapered, roll-like shape. Pick up the dough, holding it by one of the tapered ends, lift it high above the counter, and slap it down hard again several times, stretching it out in a lengthwise direction. Reach for the far end, and repeat the kneading motion with the heel of your palm and your wrist, bringing it close to you once more. Work the dough in this manner for 8 minutes.
8. Divide the dough in half, shaping each half into a thick, cigar-shaped roll, quite plump at the middle and tapered at the ends. Sprinkle the peel (or alternative) thinly with cornmeal, making sure the meal is well distributed over the surface. Place both shaped loaves on the peel, cover with a damp towel, and let them rest 30 to 40 minutes.
9. With a sharp knife or a razor blade, make a single lengthwise slash 1 inch deep along the top of each loaf. Brush the upper surface of the dough with a pastry brush dipped in water. Slide the loaves from the peel onto the preheated baking stone. Bake for 12 minutes, then turn the oven down to 375 and bake for 45 minutes more. When done, transfer the loaves to a cooling rack, and let the bread cool completely before cutting and serving it.