

Hot Cross Buns

using an overnight sponge

Adapted from recipes in *Bread Matters* by Andrew Whitley (available from www.breadmatters.com)

In medieval days it was common for bakers to place a cross on their loaves, perhaps to repel any evil spirits that might infect the bread and prevent it rising. After the Reformation, such practices were frowned on as 'popish', but the cross remained as the symbol for the Easter bun.

Rich, spicy, fruited doughs were allowed at holidays or public burials and by the seventeenth century the hot cross bun was established fare for Maundy Thursday. Until quite recently, people ate hot cross buns on just this one day of the year. Needless to say, supermarket culture has diluted such seasonal pleasure and hot cross buns now appear on shelves as soon as Christmas is over, if not all year round. Indeed, corporate marketing is adept at selling us re-heated morsels of our own history, for what is 'One a penny, two a penny' if not the original 'buy one, get one free'?

Makes 24 buns

12-24 hours before you want to make the Hot Cross Bun dough, make a Sponge and soak a Fruit mixture:

Sponge

375 g	Wholemeal flour
5 g	Dried yeast (or 10 g of fresh)
300 g	Water (at about 20°C, i.e. not very warm)
680 g	Total

Dissolve the yeast in the water. Mix in the flour until it is all moistened and the dough is reasonably smooth. No need to knead. Cover with a polythene bag or similar and leave to ferment at normal kitchen temperature.

Fruit Mix

150 g	Raisins
140 g	Sultanas
100 g	Stem ginger
60 g	Fruit juice
450 g	Total

Put everything into a strong polythene bag, tie its neck and swirl it around a bit so that the liquid comes into contact with all the dry ingredients. Do this a couple of times over the soaking period if possible.

Then, in the morning...

The Main Dough

680 g	Sponge (from above)
300 g	Strong white flour
150 g	Wholemeal flour
75 g	Butter (or olive oil)
75 g	Raw cane sugar
15 g	Mixed spice
10 g	Sea salt (if using oil or unsalted butter; 7 g if using salted butter)
200 g	Water
75 g	Egg (i.e. 1.5 medium egg)
450 g	Fruit Mix (from above)
2020 g	Total

The Crossing Mix

75 g	White flour
15 g	Olive oil
pinch	Baking powder
60 g	Water

Add the flour, spice, egg, sugar and butter to the sponge and mix until everything is combined well. Knead (or mix in a machine) for as long as it takes to develop a soft, silky dough. Add a little water if the dough becomes too stiff. It must be very soft at this stage.

Put the dough in a bowl, cover well and allow it to ferment. It will take some time for the yeast to start working again, so allow a good two hours in a fairly warm place.

Stretch the dough gently out on a lightly floured surface into a rectangle about 25 cm (10") x 20 cm (8"). Spread the soaked fruit mix over almost all the surface. Roll the dough up carefully, turn it through 90 degrees and roll it gently up again, taking care not to force the fruit through the surface.

Divide into pieces weighing 75 grams each, mould them into tight, even buns and place in accurate rows on a baking tray with a 2.5 cm (1") gap between each bun. Prove until the buns are almost touching.

Not more than 15 minutes before it is needed, mix the crossing paste by sifting the baking powder into the flour and then adding the oil and water (in two or three stages). Stir with a whisk until a smooth, slightly runny paste forms. Place this in a piping bag with a fairly fine nozzle, or cut a very small triangle (the opening should be no more than 3 mm across) from the corner of a stiff polythene bag and improvise your own piping bag.

Then pipe the crosses onto the buns as neatly as you can. Put the buns in the oven immediately after piping the crosses.

Bake at about 180°C/350°F for 10-15 minutes depending on your oven. Glaze generously as soon as the buns are out of the oven with a mixture of two parts warmed honey to one part whipping or double cream, thoroughly stirred.

Serve slightly warm and in the company of others.

© Andrew Whitley www.breadmatters.com