Focaccia Bread Art, A Brief History

Focaccia is a bread of Italian antiquity. Relative to the Focacce, Schiacciata, Lagamnum, Morteum breads as documented in ancient writings. Focaccia is believed to have been inspired by the Etruscans although some will argue it was from the Greeks. While this is up for debate over a nice glass of Italian wine, cheeses and breads, one thing is clear it has made a name for itself in Italy and that name is Focaccia. The word Focaccia is derived from the Latin word for Hearth, "From the hearth" to be exact. Originally the food of farmers and peasants who used what was available from their gardens, fields and neighbors. Fresh olive oils, herbs and cheeses were a matter of availability, rather then appeal. In its simplest form Focaccia was made of raised dough, hand stretched and dimpled with olive oil and salt and herbs, perhaps dried cheese, baked on an open hearth in the center of the Italian home. Focaccia takes on its own signature with each region of Italy. However you will find familiar versions of this bread in such places as Spain where it is called Hogaza, in Greece, Ladenia, in France, Fougasse, and all across the world it seems there are inspired versions of Focaccia. Here focaccia has taken on yet another role as Bread Art, a celebration of edible colors perfectly placed both to inspire and enjoy with all the senses.

Tap into your inner Van Gogh, Become inspired by whatever you have in the refrigerator drawer or garden and create an edible masterpiece only limited to your imagination .

Please be sure to post your Focaccia Bread Art on social media if you have it. I as well as others look forward to seeing your wonderful creations. . Now let bake...

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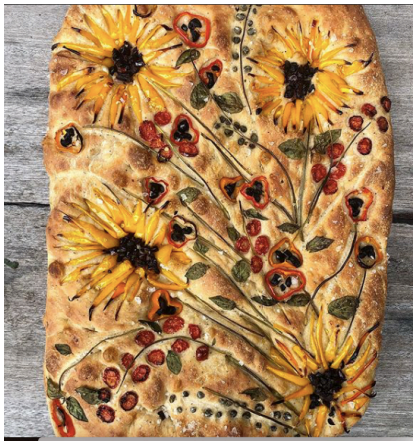
Sharing good Bread with good People

Van Dough Focaccia Bread Art

Bread art for the eyes and the eating

Makes approximately 1 large 10x14 or two medium 9x 6
Total time: 4 hours



Preferment
1 cup bread flour 146 grams
3/4 cup cool water 125 grams
1/4-teaspoon instant yeast 2 grams

"Van Dough"
3 cups of bread flour 450 grams
1 ¼ cups of warm water 285 grams
1 ½ teaspoons instant yeast 8 grams
2 teaspoons of salt 12 grams
1 tablespoon E.V.Olive oil plus extra 15 grams

Some suggested garnishes/ toppings:

Olive oil salt, pepper, garlic, parmesan cheese,
Little sweet peppers make great flowers
Olives provide black and purple color
Fresh Chives or scallions for stems, basil or parsley for leaves, Capers, small grape tomatoes, red onion, nuts cooked beans and seeds all add Beautiful color to your pallet. You are only limited to your imagination. Look at life through an edible lens. A walk in the woods, visit to a museum or just a walk threw the grocery store or farmer's market Provide wonderful inspirations.

Equipment you will Need:

I would encourage you to make this dough by hand in order to get a full understanding of texture and process of making yeasted bread. For this you will only need:

1. a large mixing bowl
2. Whisk,
3. Measuring utensils,
4. Bowl scraper or spatula,
5. Small bowl or deli container for preferment
6. Kitchen towel or plastic wrap for covering dough as it rises.

other items are parchment paper, baking pan, a paring knife are used as part of the vegetable prep and baking processes.

Step 1: Preferment:

Prepare a day ahead is best, however you could start this step a 3-4 hours before making the actual dough if you forgot. Mix 1 cup of bread flour with 3/4 cup of water and 1/4 a teaspoon of yeast, mix well, leave covered in a bowl or container at room temp overnight. This long fermentation process evokes the deep nutty sweetness of the grain and lends itself to better textures.

Step 2 The "Van Dough":

The Next day:

Place 1cup of warm water and 1 ½ teaspoons of yeast in bowl mix to dissolve. Add all of your prefermented dough and 1 tablespoon of olive oil. " Squish" this up with your fingers , breaking apart the preferment in the water mixture until there are no large chunks, then add the 3 cups of bread flour and a 1 ½ teaspoons of salt.

Mix all ingredients together until the dough just comes together in a shaggy ball. It will appear lumpy and sticky. Make sure all the flour has been incorporated, about 6-8 minutes. Let it Rest covered for 15 minutes. The next process of stretching and folding takes the place of classic kneading. It is helpful to Set a bowl of water, near your mixing bowl to dip your fingers in while stretching and folding this dough so dough won't stick to your fingers. You will stretch the dough over itself right in the bowl, turning the bowl and pulling the dough from the outer edge then folding it over toward the middle until the dough becomes a smooth ball. 8 full turns in the bowl should be enough. Cover and rest the dough for another 15 minutes, repeat this process two more times at 15-minute intervals for total of 3 sessions of stretching and folding. After final stretch and fold, you will notice the dough transforms into a supple smooth texture that moves as one uniform ball in the bowl. Next let the dough rest in a warm place well covered for 1 to 2 hours to Proof or until it just about doubles in size. Now is the time to Prep your veggies, herbs and spices for your creative presentation while the dough is "on the rise".

Vegetable and Herb Prep:

Use Raw vegetables only. Cut colorful mini peppers in different shapes long strips or circles, Trim up your herbs, slice scallions long ways for stems, or use chives, Kalamata or black olives can be chopped for flower centers, Purple onions provide brilliant color. Some cherry tomatoes can be sliced but should be laid on a paper towel to soak up some of the seeds and moisture before using. . If you are using colorful carrots, slice very thinly. The acceptation to raw vegetables is mushrooms! These contain a lot of water. I highly suggest sautéing them a bit and them pat dry before using. Cut slightly thicker pieces for tomatoes and onions. Herbs have thin membranes and brown up fast, to maintain the

green, dip your herbs in lemon water solution just before placing on focaccia and try not getting to much olive oil on them.

Come up with some creative ideas on your own. I've seen some people use beans, seeds, nuts . All great ideas and provide color as well as nutrition and flavor! Remember to keep in mind some vegetables have varying amounts of natural sugars and nuts have natural oils. Both will get darker in the oven as the focaccia bake.

The Shaping of the dough:

Preheat your oven to 450 Fahrenheit; line a heavy gage sheet pan (12x18) with parchment paper and olive oil. Gently turn out the risen dough onto a lightly floured flat surface. Gently shape the dough into a fat rectangle, place this in the center of the pan, pour a generous amount of good olive oil on the top surface of the dough and continue to stretch and dimple with your fingers until the dough is the desired size. Sort of like a cat kneading,.

Do not use a rolling pin, this will leave you with dense dough. The air bubbles are part of the overall character of Focaccia. If your dough keeps shrinking back don't fight it, Let it rest for a few minutes, the gluten will relax and it will be easy to work with again. Be sure to leave a little room on the top bottom and sides of your baking sheet for baking expansion.

Placing your decorations on the dough:

Some helpful tools to have are your fingers, chop sticks, toothpicks or skewers, clean tweezers for the tiny things and a finger bowl of water with a teaspoon of lemon juice for dipping herbs in to preserve their color while baking. When you place the veggies, herbs and spices on the dough or "canvas" the billows will help to "lock in" with gentle pushing and poking. This prevents the garnishes from falling off while baking. Because bread art takes time and the dough will be rising while you are creating your Bread art, It is nice to have a little idea of what you would be creating ahead of time. I have included a little sketch work-sheet in this packet for that purpose, feel free to sketch your ideas and take notes while you are creating and baking for future reference. Begin by placing your herbs & veggies gently in your chosen pattern on the top of your focaccia dough. When you are satisfied and everything is picture perfect, go back and press some of the veggies in so the dough is hugging them a bit. The dough should be supple and bubbly at the time. The art process takes about 30-40 minutes, which I find is just enough time for the final rise. If its not soft & puffed up just place it on the stove top for 15 minutes, be sure it is kept moist. You can spritz with a clean bottle full of clean water if needed. The dough should have puffy billows and slightly raised above the top of the ridge of the pan.

Step 3 The bake:

Bake time approximately 24 minutes. Remember every oven is different.
one last check on the embellishments, Scan your Focaccia Bread Art and gently tuck in any vegetables and herbs that may look like they are popping off. Carefully place focaccia on center rack in preheated oven. Bake at 450 for 12 minutes. Check the bread in 10 minutes, if it is already starting to brown th turn the heat down to 375 for the final 10-12 minutes. Notice if any toppings are popping off? This just means you have to tuck them into the dough a bit tighter next time. Remember to use the Sketch sheet provided to make notes about oven temp and time as well as any techniques you discovered while making your Focaccia bread art. It is Best to wait 5 minutes before cutting into your focaccia. Happy eating.

I love looking at other people's creative masterpieces, It's like going a "The Museum of Fine Food Art " , (the bread section of course). I hope you will share your Bread Art on Social media such as Instagram or Facebook. This is a wonderful way for sharing your beautiful creations and inspiring others. #Breadart #Focaccia

Wild flowers

Poppy's in the Meadow

Heart of roses

Frequently Asked Questions & Baking Tips

A warm place for your Dough:
Doug needs a nice warm environment to activate the yeast. It will rise cold or warm however the time for cold rise is much longer. A good gauge is something we call the "tee-shirt" test. If you can wear a tee shirt comfortably in your kitchen without feeling cold, it's most likely the perfect temperature for dough to rise. Some good warm spots are the top of your stove, the top of the refrigerator as well. Just be sure the dough is well covered and does not risk drying out at all. A little olive oil rubbed on the dough ball will help as well.

Flour recommendations:
I recommend using good flour like King Arthur's bread flour in the blue bag. You need high protein for chewy interior texture and crusty exterior. All-purpose will work if you can't get bread flour. Try to avoid bleached flour. The package should say, "never bleached ". or "unbleached" hope this helps (FYI; I do not work for King Arthur company, just have always used their brand with consistently excellent results)

Baking tips
I cant stress enough, because every single oven in every single house is different. Each one has its own quirks. Use the directions only as a guide, not the gospel. Your nose and your eyes will tell the real story. Using a very hot oven and a Thick gauge aluminum pan is essential to the quality of the overall texture and color. Thin aluminum disposable pans do not conduct heat well. Put oil on dough before veggies. Do not get too much oil on veggies unless you want darker colors. Do not precook any of the vegetables except mushrooms. Wetting the herbs in a bowl of water with a few drops of lemon juice helps to keep their color. Bake on high 450 for 10-12 minutes then turn down to 375 for 10-12 minutes or until crust is golden brown. Involve all your senses in baking especially common sense.

Don't Fight the Gluten
As you stretch your dough into your desired shape you will notice it will become active and want to fight back. By simply allowing a few minutes of rest will give the gluten a chance to relax and make it easier to reach your desired shape and size., be sure the dough does not dry out while resting. While there is no depth restriction, think of a regular pizza depth when shaping. Also keep in mind while you are decorating your dough it will be on the final rise. You can have it as thick as 1 to 1 1/2 inches or as think as a 1/4 inch. it is based on your own preference. Thinner will require less time in the oven and will more of a crisp bread.

Prepare ahead & Storage tips:
While fresh is always best there are times that we need to prepare ahead:
This dough can be made up to three days in advance as long as you refrigerate the dough after the final mix in a rather large container with lid (it will rise in frig) .I do not recommend precutting veggies or herbs. This should be done as dough is coming to room temp from the frig. Alternatively you could bake them and freeze them by double wrapping and bagging as soon as they are cool enough. Reheat: preheat 375 oven and heavy baking tray, place frozen focaccia in tray bake for 6-8 minutes or just until hot. E