

Pretzel Bread Can Help To Elevate Any Sandwich

BY KIM ODE
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People say beauty is skin-deep like it's a bad thing. Consider the burnished dermis of pretzel bread, a hot dining trend in the burger world, but also a resurgence of artisan technique. While the innards of a sandwich naturally get the most attention, stacking them inside a strikingly contrasted pretzel bun doubles the pleasure. Remember: We eat with our eyes.

The pretzel-like mahogany crust comes from giving each bun a quick dip in a baking soda bath. The real beauty, however, emerges from a few quick slits across the top into the interior dough which, never exposed to the baking soda, retains a creamy white color as it bakes.

The resulting contrast makes a gorgeous crust that also tastes great, thanks to the particular tang of the soda dip.

Because we love you, we're looking out for your well-being by using baking soda instead of the traditional lye. Few home bakers enjoy donning safety glasses and rubber gloves and cranking up the ventilation system just to put dinner on the table, which is what lye requires.

The essential science remains the same: Lye and baking soda are both alkalines, but lye has far more corrosive qualities. Food-quality lye may be ordered online, but it's pricey and still requires safety measures.

(Besides, using a simmering baking soda bath offers an unexpected benefit: Once all the dough is dipped, slit and popped into the oven, pour the hot soda water down your sink's drain for a quick, easy cleansing.)

Pretzel bread dough can be used for a variety of sandwiches. We like it in a smaller "slider" shape, which we've filled here with corned beef, Swiss cheese and Thousand Island dressing. To bring this Reuben into spring, we replaced the sauerkraut with the crunch of lightly dressed coleslaw. You'll get 16 sliders from this recipe.

The dough also can be made into burger-size buns (you'll get eight) and terrific beds for hot dogs or brats (again, think eight).

Or skip the sandwich stage and shape the dough into chubby pretzel breadsticks — great for adding interest to a bread basket, to munch with a cold beer or dip into melted cheese. You should get about a dozen. (Keeping them just 5 to 6 inches long makes them easier to manage in the soda bath.)

For the slashes, a razor blade (safest in a hardware-store box cutter) makes the cleanest cut, but your sharpest knife works, too. You can even snip the buns with a pair of scissors.

Whatever you use, the result will turn heads. As we make the turn into the grilling and picnicking season, pretzel bread is a tasty way to lend beauty to your feast.

PRETZEL BREAD

Makes 16 sliders, 8 burger or hot dog buns, or a dozen breadsticks.

Note: This recipe is adapted from allrecipes.com. For an even chewier roll, substitute bread flour for all-purpose flour. Instant yeast also is called rapid-rise or bread machine yeast.

- 1/2 cup water
- 1/2 cup milk
- 2 tbsp. butter, softened
- 3 cup flour
- 2 tbsp. brown sugar
- 2 1/4 tsp. (1 envelope) instant yeast
- 2 tsp. salt
- 1 egg, separated
- Cooking spray
- Cornmeal for pan
- 3/4 cup baking soda
- Coarse kosher salt for sprinkling

Directions:

Combine 1/2 cup water, milk and butter in a microwave-safe container and heat for about 45 seconds to melt the butter and warm the milk. Set aside.

In the bowl of a stand mixer or in a medium mixing bowl, combine flour, brown sugar, yeast, salt and egg yolk. Slowly begin adding milk mixture and mix until dough comes together in a shaggy mass. If it seems too dry, add a teaspoon of water. Mix or knead until the dough is smooth and springy, about 5 minutes.

In a bowl coated with cooking spray, place the dough, flipping it over so the top is oiled, too. Cover with plastic wrap and set in a warm place to rise until doubled, about an hour.

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Turn out risen dough onto a lightly floured surface and divide into equal pieces, depending on the shape you desire. To make a tight bun shape, balance the dough on your middle finger and pull the sides down and under,

pinching to make a smooth ball. Place each shaped piece of dough on a baking sheet. Once all are shaped, cover with a clean dish towel and set aside to rest.

Spray another baking sheet with cooking spray, then sprinkle with cornmeal. (The poached dough can stick to a baking sheet, so using both oil and cornmeal matters. Don't use parchment paper; if you have a Silpat, life is good.)

While the dough is resting, begin heating about 12 cups of water in a large pot. When it comes to a gentle boil, slowly

add the baking soda. It will foam and bubble vigorously.

Add the rested pieces of dough to the simmering water, poaching them for 30 seconds, then flipping them over for another 30 seconds. You may need to do this in two batches.

With a slotted spoon or spatula, lift and place poached buns on the prepared baking sheet. Froth egg white with a fork, then brush each bun with egg white. Using a box cutter or sharp knife, make 2 to 4 slits across the top of each bun, about 1/4-inch deep. Sprinkle with salt, then bake for

20 minutes until deep brown. Cool on wire rack. Pretzel buns are best eaten the same day they're baked. If you need to freeze them, or bag them for the next day, omit the salt sprinkle.

Nutrition information per serving:

- Calories: 121; Fat: 2 g; Sodium: 316 mg
- Carbohydrates: 22 g; Saturated fat: 1 g; Calcium: 17 mg
- Protein: 3 g; Cholesterol: 16 mg; Dietary fiber: 1 g

Diabetic exchanges per serving: 11/2 bread/starch, 1/2 fat.



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