

BRILLIANT BREAD EVERY WEEKEND - ON A JOURNEY WITH CAROL FIELD

Baking is one of my great loves.

Even after all these years I still get a warm satisfaction when I open the oven to a beautifully risen cake, a joyful anticipation when a yeasted dough magically rises and scones emerge like little gifts all lined up in a row.

Baking the bread was among my duties during the early restaurant years in Melbourne.

As the baby of the kitchen and a bright green novice, I actually think I did pretty well; the dough always rose, the bread tasted good, the punters liked it and we didn't run out (well, not often anyway). At that time, more than 20 years ago, **Carol Field's The Italian Baker** was recommended to me as a 'must have' book to further my journey into bread making. But with the wisdom of youth and the jaded bones that 14 hour working days engender, I foolishly dismissed the idea. Much more interesting were far shallower pursuits; boyfriends, parties, the beach...

My bread repertoire, although none too shabby in recent years, has never progressed much beyond advanced basics and suddenly, inexplicably, I now have the need to bake 'real' bread. Whilst poring over a friend's cookbook collection recently I discovered the most fantastic bread book and immediately took it home and devoured it from front to back, like any normal person would read a novel.

The book? Yes, of course, **Carol Field's The Italian Baker**.

So now I have embarked on a journey with Carol.

Following recipes to the letter is not my strength but I have disciplined myself and allowed Carol to guide me. To my delight, and her unending credit, I have produced amazing loaves of a quality never imagined. These are real breads with a wheaty depth of flavour and plenty of texture.

And they are all made from flour, salt, yeast and water – that's it. Oh, and patience too.

However, like all worthwhile pursuits, cooking requires repetition to succeed. You can't learn to bake good bread by making the odd loaf here and there, or by watching other people do it or just by reading about it. You have to do it yourself. Again and again. Loaf after loaf. Then you come to understand your bread. Is the dough too cool, too hot, too dry, just right? This loaf is a little different to the previous one. Why? What about the shape? Should the oven be hotter next time? Is one type of flour better than another?

To my mind bread is not formulaic like pastry or cakes – yeast is a living organism just like we are and with bread, A plus B does not automatically equal C. Trial and error is often the best teacher.

After 15kg flour, I am quite pleased with my progress. I haven't even started with the grains or rye flour – that's a whole other journey awaiting me.

Plunge in and have a go at this recipe for Como Bread next weekend - you will be delighted with the result and it's not nearly as tricky as it may appear. Remember with bread, the working time is short but the waiting time is long. This is definitely worth the wait.

COMO BREAD

From Carol Field's The Italian Baker

Before bed on Friday night or first thing Saturday morning. Make the starter

1 teaspoon dried yeast

1/3 cup warm water

2/3 cup milk, room temperature

135g baker's flour

Place all these ingredients in a small bowl and mix thoroughly until a smooth paste results. Cover the starter with cling film and leave in a warm place overnight.

Saturday morning

The starter will be blistered and bubbly and will have strong yeasty smell.

Scrape the starter into a mixing bowl and add 2 cups warm water, 860g baker's flour and 1 tablespoon salt. Mix to a smooth dough with a wooden spoon first of all and then use your hands. Knead the dough thoroughly on a lightly floured surface until it is smooth and elastic yet still a little tacky.

Turn the dough into a straight sided oiled container (like a bucket) and cover it loosely with cling film.

Allow the dough to rise in a warm place until it is at least doubled in size. This may take most of the day and the dough will be quite bubbly and blistered.

Then:

Either do this late in the day on Saturday or put the dough in the 'fridge overnight and resume the process on Sunday morning, just let the dough warm up before it you shape it.

Turn the dough on to floured work surface and cut it into two. Shape the two pieces into oblong loaves using polenta to assist the process and place them on a greased tray. Allow them to double in size once again.

Bake the loaves in a hot oven (210C) for about 30 - 40 minutes. The loaves should be golden brown and should hollow when tapped on their base. Cool the loaves on racks and be sure to start the process all over again before the second loaf is gone.