

Provençal Christmas Bread Recipe

Perhaps the most popular of the Christmas traditions in Provence is *les treize desserts*, or the thirteen desserts, to be enjoyed following Midnight Mass. The star of the thirteen desserts is *pompe à l'huile*, sometimes called *fougasse*, a sweet, light, openwork bread made with olive oil and flavored with orange blossom water and citrus zest. (While traditional, these flavorings are optional and the bread will still taste delicious without.)

This tasty bread may also be enjoyed throughout the year in other variations. The sugar can be increased for a sweeter bread, or a savory version could be made with less sugar and other flavorings, like aniseed, or with olives and herbs.

Whichever version you choose to make, this bread will warm your kitchen with wonderful aromas and delight all those at your table.

3 $\frac{3}{4}$ cups Flour (plus more for kneading dough)

1 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup Sugar (*optional to add more for sweeter bread)

1 package active dry yeast (approx 7grams)

1 cup warm Water

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup Extra-Virgin Olive Oil (plus approx 2 tbsp. for oiling bowl and brushing finished bread)

2 tsp. Kosher Salt

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp Orange Flower Water (*optional)

Zest of one Lemon (*optional)

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- Combine 1 1/2 cups of flour, the sugar, yeast, and 1 cup of warm water in a large bowl. Stir to combine with a wooden spoon or silicon spatula. Allow the mixture rest in a warm spot for around 30 minutes. The mixture should be bubbly before progressing to the next step. (If it hasn't become bubbly, chances are your yeast was too old and didn't activate.)
- Add the remaining 2 1/4 cups flour, the olive oil, and salt to the mixture. Add the optional flavoring if using – orange flower water, lemon zest and/or orange zest. Stir everything together until a dough forms.
- Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface. Keep some extra flour nearby in case dough becomes sticky. Knead the dough, flipping and turning, flipping and turning, until the dough is smooth and elastic. This should take around 5 minutes.
- Grease a large, clean bowl with the a bit of the oil, place dough into the bowl, then cover with a clean towel. Set aside in a warm spot for three or four hours to let the dough rise. It should double in size.
- Preheat oven to 400°
- Turn dough out onto a large sheet of parchment paper and gently stretch it with your fingers to form a 12" circle or

long oval. Using a small, sharp knife or kitchen shears, cut out five or six 2 inch long slits. Each slit should be about an inch wide. Use your fingers to gently stretch the holes open so they don't close up when the bread is baked.

– Transfer the dough and parchment paper to a large baking sheet. Bake for 15 – 20 minutes, checking after 10 minutes. Bread should be puffed up and golden brown. (And your kitchen will smell amazing!)

– Remove the bread from the oven and immediately brush the top and sides with a bit of olive oil. Allow the bread to cool to room temperature on a rack, or serve warm.

– Following tradition, *pompe à l'huile* must be broken by hand, and never cut with a knife, to insure good fortune in the coming year.