

Jim Lahey on Baking



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*Jim Lahey is widely known for popularizing the “no-knead” bread method, which he chronicled in his book, *My Bread: The Revolutionary No-Work No-Knead Method* (W. W. Norton, 2009). He received the James Beard Foundation’s Award for Outstanding Baker in 2015.*

What brought you into baking?

Visiting Italy in my youth, I was exposed to food. All the ideas I had about good food were shaken to the core by this seemingly insular country that had region-by-region great food traditions. When I was able to eat this amazing, good-enough-on-its-own bread, it lit a fire in me and got me excited about figuring out how to make it. The breads of Rome at that time were amazing; there still were an enormous number of older practitioners of baking. Whereas today, most of the bakers in Rome rely on refrigeration to get a decent end result. I’m of the nonrefrigeration school.

How would you compare American and Italian culture in terms of their approaches to food and baking?

We’re an extremely heterogeneous society with different cultures and different traditions. We have foods that aren’t necessarily based on a particular tradition. If you looked at the gazillion locally produced “artisanal” foods or the popularity of different cultures’ cuisines, we are a bunch of “other.” I grew up with Italian neighbors sharing their family meatball recipe, so I’ve got my memory of making meatballs with my Irish-American mom. We have hamburgers in the States, but who owns the hamburger?

It’s amazing how much food has changed in the last few decades.

Part of it is the Internet and part of it is global travel. If you want to see how a loaf of bread is shaped, you can go online and watch thousands of videos. Granted, watching a video without some reference to what it’s supposed to be like doesn’t mean you’re going to succeed at making a loaf of bread.

Let’s talk about bread. What do you mean that you’re part of the nonrefrigeration school?

Well, obviously we need some form of cooling to store and ferment foods. I prefer, in my practice of making bread, not to refrigerate the dough after it’s been mixed so it’s not taking up valuable real estate in the refrigerator.

So it’s more pragmatic, as opposed to the way it changes the flavor of the dough?

Yeah. It’s true if you hold the dough at a colder temperature during the various stages of fermentation, you’re going to coax out certain flavor profiles that you might miss at room temperature. Refrigeration gives you the convenience of being able to get it right more often than not, but you’re not really learning about how things ferment. I view the act of making bread as a practice, like yoga or a martial art. If you’re making bread and you’re doing it at room temperature, you have a working knowledge; an intuitive sense of what temperature range the dough needs to stay within.

The wonderful convenience of dry yeast and of the no-knead method is that it just doesn’t matter whether you have that knowledge. What you gain from practicing it is the first step of understanding the power of fermentation.

Your no-knead bread that Mark Bittman wrote about in the *New York Times* got so many people into their kitchens to make bread.

It was magical because they didn’t have to have this notion of what that the archetypal loaf of bread is, of what you might see made in the Mediterranean countryside.

Let’s talk about the variables in baking bread that someone at home might be missing.

Temperature plays a significant role. I see it with how much yeast I need to

use and the length of time. I currently don't have great heating in my bakery. In wintertime, for a batch of bread which involves yeast, I might have to put as much as 6 grams in for every kilo of flour. In the summertime, and this is all on the same formula, I can use a quarter of a gram!

There's also change of insular properties of the dough. When you make dough, it's not a liquid and it's not a solid; it's a viscous mass somewhere between a solid and a liquid. It has particular properties, a certain stickiness, cohesion, viscosity. But as it begins to ferment and become a sponge, its insular properties change dramatically. In winter, if you're doing a large batch of dough, like 30 kilos, you'll notice a 10 to 15 degree [5 to 8°C] difference from the outside of the blob to the center of the blob. I have to forecast what the weather is going to be in order to chart the course of the fermentation!

What differences, in your experience, would you expect to see between no-knead and kneaded bread?

If there's any pigmentation in the wheat, a no-knead dough will retain the pigmentation. So you will actually see a crumb that's maybe yellow or pinkish or brownish, depending on the type of wheat you use. If you knead the dough mechanically, the introduction of oxygen through the kneading process will create a lighter color from a bleaching effect. If you do a side by side of kneaded dough and an unkneaded dough, you can see it pretty clearly. Texturally, a no-knead bread has a looser, less defined crumb structure.

Since no-knead bread relies on time for the gluten to form, can one split the difference between no-knead and standard kneading for some sort of "low-knead" bread?

If you look at French baking, after you combine the ingredients together, it refers to this idea. The dough has been allowed to absorb water and smell and begins to awaken, and you introduce the salt as a functional conditioner for the dough. Éric Kayser has long promoted the low-knead method, where the dough isn't kneaded intensively.

There's a lot of mumbo-jumbo mythology around what people think.

At the end of the day, we're going to look at the end product as eaters. If you go to any supermarket, it's not like they have particular strains of wheat. They have stacks of wheat and you don't know where the grains came from, nor do you know the mills.

I always say: it's not the wheat that makes great bread, it's the knowledge of the baker. You can have the best wheat in the world and still make very low-quality bread. And you can have what one might consider the worst commercial flour in the world and be fantasizing that there's some little farm, "it makes me think of the hillsides in France."

No-Knead Bread

Mix everything in a large mixing bowl until the dough is shaggy, about 15–60 seconds. Cover and let rest at room temperature for 12–24 hours.

Place either a medium-sized cast iron pot or Pyrex or ceramic bakeware in your oven with the lid on and preheat to 500°F / 260°C.

Weight	Volume	Baker's %	Ingredient
450g	3 to 3¼ cups	100%	Flour
350g	1½ cups	78%	Water
8g	1¼ teaspoon	1.8%	Salt
~2g	½ teaspoon	–	Instant yeast

While the oven is heating, transfer the dough onto a surface dusted with flour, wheat bran, or cornmeal. The dough should be almost stringy, clinging to the bowl as you dump it. Fold a few times and shape into a boule (a round loaf). Transfer the dough onto a generously floured cloth towel and proof until roughly doubled in volume, about another hour. Using the towel, flip and dump the risen dough ball into the preheated bakeware and cook with the lid on for 30 minutes. Take the lid off and bake until the crust has a brown chestnut color, about another 15–20 minutes.