

PROSPHORA (CHURCH BREAD)

INGREDIENTS

- Flour (I use Organic White Strong Bread flour) about 300gr for a medium loaf
- Lukewarm water (hot enough for the yeast to be activated but cool enough to put your hand in, if it's too hot it will "kill" the yeast, if not hot enough it won't activate it), about 200ml (less than a glass) for each loaf
- Holy water (a few drops)
- Olive oil (about a tbsp for each loaf)
- Sugar or honey (about a tsp for each loaf)
- Salt (about a level tsp for each loaf)
- Yeast (fresh or dry. You can buy fresh at Sainsbury's bakery, you need about 15gr -about a tbsp- for each loaf. You can keep fresh yeast for a long time in the freezer, leave at room temperature before using) or 1 ½ to 2 tsp dry yeast for each loaf)

Also: a big bowl and round loaf tins (99p each from Wilckinson's), if possible use these utensils for prosphora only, the holy seal, a skewer (to make the holes round the loaf), your *kantili* (oil lamp) incense burner, an icon, peace and quiet and lots of prayer!

HOW TO MAKE

Make sure your utensils are spotless (esp. if you don't only use them for prosphora), gather everything you need in front of an icon, light an oil lamp, burn some incense and start saying the Lord's prayer (Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on us), throughout the kneading, also remembering the names of the living and the departed.

Prepare the yeast (if you're using fresh yeast): put the yeast in a bowl or measuring jug with some of the sugar or honey, the flour and the water, mix, cover with a cloth and leave to rise and froth up in a warm, draft-free place, (about 12min). If using dry instant yeast, skip this stage and just mix the yeast with all the ingredients.

Put the flour in the bowl and add (making the sign of the cross as you do it) the oil, salt, sugar or honey, 3 (for the Holly Trinity) drops of holy water and the yeast. Start mixing, adding water until you have a soft, elastic dough that's pliable but not too tacky. Tip out of the bowl and start kneading on a clean, flat, surface dusted with flour. If your dough is too hard add some more water, if it's too sticky add a bit more flour (don't be too hasty to add flour though, even the perfect consistency dough is initially sticky. Keep kneading and it will become smooth and elastic. Too much flour will make the dough too hard; you want it to be soft as an ear lobe).

After about 12min of kneading (don't forget praying as you do it), shape the dough in a ball, dust with flour, put back in the (floured) bowl, cover with a cloth and leave to prove and rise in a warm, draft-free place, (about 45-60min, depending on the room temperature, till it has doubled in size). Then tip the dough out again and knock out the air, shape in loaves, press flat with your palm in well-oiled tins, cover with a cloth and allow to rest for about 12 min. Pre-heat the oven (medium, gas mark 4-5)

Dust the holy seal with some flour, shake off excess, and firmly press on each loaf. With the skewer make 12 (for the 12 Apostles) holes around the seal (I first pierce 4, making the sign of the cross and then two between each of the initial two).

Bake for about 30-40min, depending on the oven, until they are golden on top and sound hollow when you tap them underneath (you might have to take the loaf out of the tin and bake it a bit longer until it's dry and well baked underneath and sounds hollow when you tap with your knuckle).

Leave to cool, without the tin, on a cooling rack (otherwise the steam will make your bread soggy underneath), maybe covered with a clean, dry cloth. Your holy bread, made with love and prayer, is ready.

Evangelia, Holy Cross, Lancaster, U.K.
www.orthodox-lancaster.org.uk