



À mes amis/To my friends,

Incroyable ! It is a time of year for rejoicing! This year I am happy to announce that the *pain de France* has finally received its rightful praise. On November 30th the *baguette* was added to the Intangible Cultural Heritage list by UNESCO. What a joyous day to celebrate the most delectable baked good in the world. As you all know, I am a *boulangère* and we bakers in France deserve our praise. In a world obsessed with counting carbs and the evils of gluten, it is time to recognize the power of bread to sustain a nation!

Every night before I go to bed, I create the poolish which raises the baguette. I moved into the apartment above the bakery this year after Marcel and I divorced. It is just my pet cat Claude and I in the bed. In a large bowl I combine $\frac{3}{4}$ cup flour, 6 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon warm water, and $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. yeast, and let stand at room temperature, covered with a clean kitchen towel or plastic wrap overnight. In the early hours of morning (but not before 4 am by law in France) I mix together in a large bowl or the bowl of a stand mixer, 1 cup poolish, 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups unbleached bread flour or all-purpose flour plus two tablespoons, 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. salt, $\frac{3}{4}$ tsp. yeast, and 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ cup water, and stir with a spoon or the paddle attachment of a mixer on low speed until a ball forms. The dough should be soft, not sticky. Sometimes I add a little more flour or water if needed.

Next, I transfer the dough ball to a floured counter, and knead until dough passes the windowpane test, about 10 minutes by hand or six minutes on medium speed in a stand mixer fitted with a dough hook. Then I transfer kneaded dough to a large, lightly oiled bowl, and roll to coat with oil. I cover with a clean kitchen towel or plastic wrap and let rest at room temperature until the dough nearly doubles in size, about two hours. When my boys were small I would walk them to school at this time. Now that Jacques attends university and Éliott is working as a botanist in New Caledonia, I sip my *café au lait* and bake the day's croissants. Our croissants have been a best seller this year at the bakery.

After our early morning rush, I remove the dough, and lightly knead by hand for about a minute, returning to the bowl and re-cover. I then let the dough rest at room temperature until it doubles in size, about two more hours. Meanwhile I tend to baking the *pain au chocolat*. After the aroma of chocolate is in the air I transfer the baguette dough to a lightly floured counter and divide into thirds using a bench scraper or serrated knife, being careful not to deflate any air bubbles. Alas, last year I lost the "Grand Prix de la Baguette de Tradition Française de la Ville De Paris" competition because some of my air bubbles deflated. And to think I could have been baking a baguette for President Macron, an honor bestowed to the winner. Carefully I shape each piece into a long baguette loaf. The trick is to stretch out the two short sides and

then fold them in to meet in the middle of the dough and press to seal. Then fold the top and bottom in to meet and press those to seal.

I then prepare my oven by heating it to 260 degrees (500 deg. F) and place my cast iron skillet on a rack in the lowest position in the oven. Then I transfer shaped baguettes to a *couché* (a special floured cloth), floured towels, or parchment paper. You must proof at room temperature until the baguettes have grown to one-and-a-half times their original size but still spring back when poked, about 46 to 60 minutes.

To give the baguette her classic look, with the seam side down, I score the baguettes using a bread lame or razor blade. Then I cut three to five ¼-inch deep evenly spaced diagonal slashes on the surface of the baguette. Last May I had to go to the hospital after I cut myself with the blade by accident. Thank goodness for universal healthcare. Then I dust the back of a sheet pan with semolina flour or cornmeal and gently transfer loaves to the back of the sheet pan. I gently place the sheet pan with the baguettes on the middle rack. I pour 1 cup hot water into the empty loaf pan on the bottom rack, and close the oven door. I sing a verse or two of *Ne Me Quitte Pas*, then spray the oven walls with water, and close the oven door. I repeat spraying after 30 more seconds, then repeat again. I lower oven temperature to 450°F and bake for 10 minutes, then rotate 180 degrees. I continue baking until golden brown and an instant-read thermometer inserted into the center of the loaves reads 205°F or higher. If the loaves are browning too quickly, I reduce oven temperature to 350°F or turn it off.

My favorite part is removing the loaves and letting them cool on a wire rack, at least 40 minutes. I always take in *l'arôme agréable* while the loaves cool. Then you can enjoy *une baguette de tradition*! Take in the aroma of sweet grains and yeast, listen for the crunch of the browned crust and delight in the light, airy and warm center. I hope that you savor this *magnifique* treasure de France this holiday season.

Warm wishes from the oven! Chaleureux vœux de la boulangerie!



<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/classic-french-baguette-recipe-learn-how-to-make-baguettes-at-home> (Accessed: December 3, 2022).