

LEITE'S CULINARIA



Broa (Portuguese Cornmeal Bread)

by Elisabeth Luard
from *The Food of Spain and Portugal*
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Makes 2 large loaves

Broa, a bread made with yellow or white cornmeal, is the daily grain food of the poorer regions of Portugal, mountain territory where the semi-wild pigs of the old ibérico breed provide a cash crop. It has a distinctive whitish crust which cracks to reveal a golden-brown crumb. Corn, a hardy grain, an introduction from the New World, which proved a boon to upland fanners, is combined with wheat flour in varying proportions. The higher the proportion of wheat flour, the lighter the loaf. Although this recipe uses a high proportion of wheat to cornmeal—2:1 by weight—*broa* is never dainty. It tastes good, though, and is an excellent keeper.

INGREDIENTS

2 pounds white unbleached bread flour
1 pound (3 cups) fine-ground cornmeal (polenta)
1 teaspoon salt
Two 2/3-ounce fresh yeast cakes
About 5 cups warm water

For finishing

Flour, for dusting
Oil or lard, for greasing

METHOD

1. Sift the flour into a warm bowl and stir in the cornmeal and salt. Dissolve the fresh yeast in a cupful of the warm water and sprinkle with a spoonful of the flour. Work the yeasty liquid into the flour, adding as much of the water as you need to make a soft, sticky, rather wet dough. Work the dough to stretch the gluten (push and tug), form it into a ball, and dust with flour. Set it to rise under a damp cloth in a warm place for a couple of hours until more than doubled in bulk: you need well-risen dough with nice big bubbles to get a crisp light bread.
2. Dust your hands and the table with flour. Scoop out the dough and punch it down roughly with your fists to distribute the air. Cut the dough in half, work each piece into a ball, and dust generously with flour.
3. Transfer to a greased baking sheet, cover with a cloth, and let rise again in a warm kitchen for 30 minutes,
4. Preheat the oven to 400°F (200°C). Bake the bread for about an hour, until well-risen and hollow-sounding when you tap the bottom. Don't undercook the loaves, or they'll be heavy. Perfect with a spoonful of *Queijo da Serra* (mountain cheese: ripe and runny in winter and spring, firm and pungent later in the year) or a few slivers of the region's magnificent salt-cured hams and sausages.

When stored in a cotton bag and hung in a current of air, home-baked bread dries out rather than growing a furry green jacket and rotting. In dried form, it provides the basis for dozens of different soaked-bread dishes, serving much the same function in Portugal as dried pasta in Italy.

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