



Secrets of a Jewish Baker: Recipes for 125 Breads from Around the World

George Greenstein

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For more than twenty years, George Greenstein owned and operated a Long Island bakery that produced all sorts of baked goods, from all sorts of ethnic traditions—focaccia and Irish soda bread, Bavarian pumpernickel and naan—including many from his own culture, such as Jewish corn bread, challah, and bagels. His bakery was one of those neighborhood treasures where every weekday evening commuters picked up brown paper bags filled with a dozen Vienna rolls straight from the oven, and every weekend morning lines extended out the door for hours. In this James Beard Award-winning cookbook, Greenstein reveals 125 recipes for the yeasted and quick breads that have been handed down through his family by three generations of bakers—the breads that made his bakery so well-loved for so many years. And now that most neighborhood bakeries like Greenstein's are long since closed, this classic collection serves not only to teach bakers everywhere how to make those delicious, classic breads, but it also preserves authentic versions of the included Jewish recipes for all to enjoy. With the same helpful features that made this a cherished cookbook upon its original publication—separate instructions for mixing each recipe by hand, food processor, and stand mixer; tips for baking a week's worth of bread in as few as two hours; invaluable baker's secrets; and a very approachable style throughout—this revised edition also includes twelve new recipes to satisfy both old fans and new. So bring the spirit of that great old bakery back to life right in your very own kitchen, filling every room of your house with the wonderful aroma of freshly baked bread. And rest assured you'll bake with ease and success every time, thanks to George and his long-learned, very happily shared SECRETS OF A JEWISH BAKER.

Secrets of a Jewish Baker: Recipes for 125 Breads from Around the World Details

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From Reader Review Secrets of a Jewish Baker: Recipes for 125 Breads from Around the World for online ebook

Robert Beveridge says

George Greenstein, Secrets of a Jewish Baker (Ten Speed Press, 1993)

Warning: if you have been tasked by your doctor with a gluten-free lifestyle, avoid this book.

Yeah, Greenstein does offer a number of gluten-free recipes (and just-about-anything-else-free, depending on your dietary restrictions), but you'd have to have the willpower of Hercules to resist the rest of the recipes in this tome. Secrets of a Jewish Baker starts off with a quick overview of the tools of the trade and some generic tips, then dives right into the recipes. Hundreds of breads, cakes, muffins, rolls, and other baked goods just cry out "try me" from the page. More importantly, the recipes also, if you read between the lines, show you the commonality to be found within, to give you license to perform your own experiments. Just thinking about it has me to the point where I'm scurrying off to lunch after I finish writing this. This one should be in the kitchen of every home baker. ****

Amanda says

Good assortment of bread recipes. Wish they were in metric though since volume measurements and final results can vary depending on measuring technique/air temperature/humidity/etc.

Dineen says

Great book for authentic, sometimes rare recipes.

N.N. Light says

I love baking bread and am always looking for new recipes and new tricks of the trade. I've tried making challah bread with mixed results. So when I came across Secrets of a Jewish Baker, I had to pick it up. Filled with 125 recipes from an old pro when it comes to bread, this is a must-read. It reads easily and the recipes are fantastic. I've tried a couple and they came out amazing! Note: this is not for a novice baker. Highly recommend!

My Rating: 5+ stars

Elizabeth says

If only we had a whole wall in the kitchen to shelve bread books! If this were the case, this book would definitely be there. And if I had known about it earlier, I would have bought it instead of a couple of the bread books we have that we imagined would be highly informative, yet now rarely consult.

There is something sensual about kneading dough. Touching and molding it is a true hands-on experience. [...] I have spent my life working with my hands in pursuit of the perfect loaf. What is the perfect bread? How does one know when it has been found? Who is qualified to judge? [...] One night working alone while the others were asleep, I was standing in front of a huge oven. Behind me was a wire rack containing more than two hundred loaves, hot and just removed from the oven. All was still in the bakery that very first time I heard the rye bread sing. I turned and stood listening, at first without comprehension, then a smile, recognizing the sound [...] To the baker's ear, the almost imperceptible crackling, multiplied a hundredfold, is a song of praise for the perfect loaf. (dedication p.vii)

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Our daily bread, as is our country's heritage, is rooted in the culture of our immigrant ancestors. Some recipes have remained intact for hundreds of years. Others are derivations that have evolved as bakers strive for perfection. Many of the new breads are in fact old breads rediscovered, or new combinations of ingredients that have been forgotten in the passage of time. The breads that grace our table are from an amalgam of ethnic recipes gathered the world over. (Chapter Five: Breads of all Nations)

All the recipe instructions are laid out with hand-mixing instructions first, followed by instructions for mixing using a food processor with a steel blade, then instructions for mixing with a stand mixer fitted with a flat beater and dough hook. I find it a bit strange that he doesn't stress that unless you are making zillions of loaves at once, making the dough by hand is actually easier.

It has been my experience that many excellent cooks and bakers are intimidated by the thought of making bread at home. Yet bread baking can be made simple to understand for both the novice and the experienced baker. Errors can be easily corrected so that the beginners' first attempts are successful, and with a little practice, professional results can be achieved.
(Chapter One: Basic Materials p 1)

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Baker's Secret For rye breads, some bakers dust with rye flour, which adds its own flavor to the bottom crust when baked. Italian bakers dust with semolina flour for the same reason. In an emergency, I used finely ground bread crumbs to dust peels in my bakery. Although crumbs tend to burn in the oven and can generate smoke, they got us through days when no dusting meal was available. (Chapter One: Basic Materials)

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All of the yeast-raised breads in this book can be mixed by hand. I suggest that your first efforts be done by hand, which will provide you with a basic feeling for the doughs. Choose one of two methods-the straight dough method or the sponge method. Neither is difficult. (Chapter Two: Bread Making A to Z)

I really like that Greenstein stresses the need to reduce waste - to use up old bread in various ways: "*The successful baker converts or recycles stale bread into fresh products. Altus is one way to use old bread.*" by making bread crumbs, bread pudding: "*[B]ear in mind that you can make savory bread puddings, too*", bruschetta, croutons, French toast, garlic bread, rusks, stuffing, thickening: "*Use stale bread to thicken soups*", toast.

There is a section entitled "What went wrong? Why bad things happen and how to fix them". I had high hopes that there would be some new (for me) insights. Alas, not really. The part for "not rising" is particularly disappointing, with no mention of temperature of ingredients (possibly too high temperature when proofing the yeast, or too low temperature all round). But the rest of this troubleshooting section is otherwise good for a brand new bread baker. I particularly like the following:

Sometimes whatever went wrong is not immediately obvious. The baker must put on a detective's hat. Most often the culprit turns out to be a careless baker. Measure carefully. Double-check that no ingredients have been omitted. (Chapter Two: Bread Making A to Z, p31)

Reading the recipe that follows the introduction for white bread makes me, once again, ever grateful to my mother. This recipe is very similar to the one she made when I was growing up. I can still conjure up the wonderful feeling I got after coming home from school. I'd cut two generous slices of Mum's beautiful freshly baked bread, slather them with butter and then layer on thin thin thin slices of cheddar cheese. What a treat that was!!

In my opinion, commercially available white bread, which is truly the staff of life and the most widely used bread that we produce, has lost that wonderful quality and flavor of years gone by. What makes white bread wonderful? The crust should be thick and rich in color [...] The bread should have a tight texture, toast evenly, slice cleanly [...] Next is aroma: Hand a slice of bread to a baker and the first thing that he or she will do is take a deep whiff. The aroma of bread to a baker is like the perfume of a flower [...] Last but not least is flavor. The bread should chew well, not taste spongy or cardboardlike, and be bursting with rich flavor. (Chapter Three: Basic Yeast Bread)

Remarkably, the sour starter that is described is made with rye and Greenstein's Sourdough Whole Wheat Recipe calls for Rye sour. And most surprisingly, Greenstein calls for adding commercial yeast to all his "sourdough" breads! Even the recipe for Hutzeltrot (Chapter Six) calls for commercial yeast, in spite of its introduction: "*This is an ancient bread. It is believed to date back before refined sugar was manufactured*" and also in spite of this sentence in Chapter One: "*Some artisan breads should only be naturally fermented*". Consequently, I was rather disappointed in this section of the book. My disappointment was possibly greater because it was one of the reasons I got the book out of the library.

My father, a Hungarian baker, told me stories about cooks in Europe whose culinary ability was rated by the quality of their bread. He related that when a young woman married, included

in her dowry was some sourdough starter from her mother. These starters were passed on from mother to daughter and [...] the culture was never allowed to die. (Chapter Six: Sourdough Breads)

To make:

Portuguese Corn Bread *When I first came upon this bread, also known as broa, in a Portuguese bakery, I was surprised because it seemed central European to me. This bread requires a hot oven and it likes a great deal of steam. Made up of a combination of flours, it is heavy, moist, and crusty. [...] Four people can easily devour an entire loaf in one sitting.*
(Chapter Four: Corn and Potatoes: Seeds of the Americas, p45)

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Potato Bread *Long before the invention of modern yeast, potatoes and the starchy water in which they were boiled were used to leaven bread. today we use potatoes and their boiling water for the flavor and tenderness the impart to the finished bread. Potato breads keep exceptionally well in a bread box*

(Chapter Four: Corn and Potatoes: Seeds of the Americas, p45)

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Challah *[...] Poppy seeds can be decoratively applied by wetting your thumbs, pressing them into the seeds, then pressing the seeds onto the sides of the bottom braid, forming an oval pattern.*
(Chapter Five: Breads of all Nations, Challah, p68)

Favourite passages:

Correcting Misconceptions *[...] With modern yeast, we no longer proof unless the potency is suspect. This holds true for the active dry yeast packets used in the home kitchen. If the yeast is not outdated, there is no need to proof it. One must, however, activate the dry yeast by dissolving it first in warm water [...]*

[T]here is an enzyme present in whole milk that is able to destroy the yeast cells, causing the dough to rise poorly or preventing it from rising at all. Bakers very quickly learned that by scalding the milk, the enzyme was destroyed [...] Pasteurization and sterilization are heat processes, and the enzymes in question are no longer present in our milk, so there is no reason to scald it. [...] Thinking this through, it should become apparent that powdered milk has been manufactured with a heat process that destroys the enzyme. When a formula specifies skim milk powder, it is used as a dry ingredient and the dough is made in the normal manner.

[...]

I am appalled by recipes that call for vinegar to be incorporated into the dough to create sourdough bread and rolls. Sourdough breads and rolls made from a proper sour, or starter, have no vinegary flavor. The sourdough process adds a pre-fermented base to the bread dough, which results in a dough that is more aged and a crumb with more moisture. It creates better texture and produces superior flavor.

Sour, fermented by wild yeast present in the air, was used as leavening to make breads rise as far back as ancient Egypt. It often produced erratic results. With the advent of modern yeast, we use the sour for flavor and aging and rely on yeast for controlled leavening. Some artisan breads should only be naturally fermented. Hand a baker a slice of bread and he or she will most likely smell the bread before tasting. Smell the aroma of real sour rye or sourdough wheat bread and you will instantly become an expert at recognizing it.
(Chapter One: Basic Materials)

p12, 13)

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European in origin, altus is little known outside of bakeries. When introduced to altus, many people think of it as a method of using up stale bread. However, as with many old-fashioned techniques, bakers find that it enhances the desirable qualities of certain breads. Its use seems to have begun in the making of pumpernickel doughs, and the best of these breads often contain altus.

Altus is a mash made by slicing leftover rye bread and trimming away the crusts, soaking the trimmed bread in water for several hours or overnight under refrigeration, then squeezing it dry. Added in small amounts to bread dough, altus intensifies the distinctive flavor of pumpernickel and rye bread and helps them retain moisture. When using altus, allow for a little extra flour in the recipe. The mash keeps well, covered, in the refrigerator. (Chapter Two: Bread Making A to Z, p15)

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Buttermilk or sour milk tenderizes yeast breads and makes them lighter. [...] Sour milk can be made by a slower clabbering process, but for baking it can be made quickly by adding 1 teaspoon vinegar or lemon juice to 1 cup skim milk. Allow to stand until clabbered (about 10 minutes). This sour milk can be substituted for buttermilk in any recipe. (Chapter Two: Bread Making A to Z)

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[Glazing bread is the method] the baker uses immediately before baking to provide a proper finish or glaze to the bread. [...] Before slashing the top of the bread and placing it in the oven, the tops may be brushed with a pastry brush dipped into a cornstarch solution [...] For a high shine, brush a second time as soon as the bread emerges from the oven. (Chapter Two: Bread Making A to Z)

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Shaping a loaf is a critical step in producing a professional-looking loaf with the proper texture. Most instructions merely tell you to roll into a tube shape or roll up like a jelly roll. This type of instruction is insufficient for achieving a perfect loaf. The dough must be molded tightly and have the appropriate shape to bake correctly. A little extra time spent in shaping the loaves will result in better breads every time. (Chapter Two: Bread Making A to Z)

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Steam introduced into the oven during the baking process is the key to developing a proper crust on bread. Essential during the first part of the baking process, steam allows for better rising in the oven and slows development of the crust. The steam keeps the crust moist so that it does not split while it rises in the oven. Steam is also necessary for giving the bread its sheen. [...] Before slashing the breads prior to putting them in the oven, brush the tops with water or a cornstarch solution [...] I prefer the cornstarch method for breads that should have a shiny crust, such as Jewish rye bread, and the water method for French- and Italian-style breads. (Breads that are brushed with an egg wash are baked without steam.) (Chapter Two: Bread Making A to Z)

Alexis says

Koeeoaddi says

Great book! I liked the reminiscences almost as much as the recipes. Haven't tried it yet, but if the seeded Jewish rye [Rye Bread with Onion and Caraway] turns out as I hope -- chewy crust, light crumb -- I'm upping this a star.

Rebecca P says

I love this book. Greenstein has the great voice of an old-time baker, and it's fun to read his anecdotes, such as his story of visiting a bakery in Italy, where he hung out in the back with the bakers and communicated through sign language and gestures. Wonderful cracked wheat bread.

Wench says

Incredibly thorough. Includes instructions for making everything by hand - often missing from modern bread recipes - as well as food processor and stand mixer. Includes a number of old-school bakery standbys, including baguettes, Jewish rye bread, black and whites, and more. Also includes notes on finding ingredients, shaping, troubleshooting, and efficiency in baking. **HIGHLY recommended.**

Anne says

Good bakery book for breads

Blanca says

I've heard this book hailed as the definitive bread book, so I was eager to read it. True enough, the recipes have less to do with a "Jewish" way of baking than just a thorough way of baking excellent bread. This reads for the experienced baker and can come across as intimidating to home bakers with techniques such as creating steam, as for baking bagels. However, for the ambitious, it does provide a comprehensive guide of how to correct dough and provides a troubleshooting section.

Yaaresse says

First published in 1993. I think the 2007 date might be for the e-book edition.

I liked this better than my rating might indicate, but I'm harsh in assessing cookbooks, especially e-book editions, so not much is going to get five stars from me in this category.

Bad news first:

1. No hyperlinks in the table of contents or recipe index. If you want to find a recipe, you have to tap through to it. There is a table of recipes per chapter in the back, so it's not as clunky to find things as some books I've seen.
2. Those who need glamor shots of every recipe are out of luck. The photo on the front will have to satisfy you. (In all fairness, this isn't really a negative for me, but I know some people freak out if instructions to boil water don't include step-by-step pictures.)
3. Recipes are all volume measurements. Would have been nice to have the weight measurements, which are more accurate.

Now the good news:

1. Excellent sections on troubleshooting loaves, shaping breads, and lots of tips about technique and tools. (And, finally, a description of altus that makes sense.) Also, something I've never seen in another baking book, which is a series of "baking menus" showing how to efficiently use time to produce 4-8 different kinds of breads within a few hours. It's production baking scaled down to make sense for a home kitchen.
2. Recipes are clear and concise. No chit-chat, no constant bragging about himself, none of that blogger mindset. They also include instructions for using food processor and stand mixer.
3. Good selection of basic recipes, including a very good sour rye and Irish Raisin bread.

Good resource. Not too technical nor too chatty.

Inder says

This is my new favorite bread baking book. It promises professional results for the home baker, and I must say, I am impressed.

The background and basic instructions in the beginning are essential reading. Each bread has separate recipes for kneading by hand, by food processor, and using a stand mixer, and the actual proportions vary by method. The recipes are very clear regarding what type of flour to use - all purpose, white bread flour, whole wheat bread flour. The recipes are generally very precise, which I appreciate.

The whole wheat bread recipes in this book are astounding. This book contains a 100% whole wheat bread recipe that seriously, beats every other pure whole wheat recipe I have tried. The partial whole wheat challah is one of my favorite breads ever. Absolutely scrumptious. (The white bread recipes are great too, but interestingly, do not hold up as well in comparison to other books. This book is a must-have for whole grain bakers.)

In the back is a section called "Twelve Menus: A Morning of Baking," where the steps for baking six or seven loaves of bread, plus muffins or quick bread, are laid out. I doubt I will ever try to bake that much bread in one morning, but this section strongly appeals to my inner wanna-be-pioneer-woman.

Which is to say, in addition to being a good compilation of bread recipes, this book is really fun to read. Highly recommended.

Wendy says

This is my all-time favorite cookbook. This book taught me to bake bread that my kids would actually fight over. My sister and mother requested copies for themselves after hearing me rave about it.

The most important part is the bread troubleshooting guide in the front - no other cookbook had this that I knew of, and it proved worth the price of the book alone.

If you use a typical home KitchenAid mixer, don't use the mixer version of the recipes. It's too much for your machine to handle. The hand-mix version is just right.

I will be very sad when this book eventually bites the dust.

Bpatoosk says

I've tried making bread several times and this book was the best I've found for describing exactly how to knead the dough and how much to let it rise. That being said, I wasn't overwhelmingly happy with selection of bread recipes - but that'd be my only complaint for the book; and it's probably because I have another book of just recipes that I absolutely love. This is a great How-To.
