

Cinnamon Rolls Made Fresh at Home

Slow fermentation using poolish had made a difference with rustic and lean doughs. Could it help such a rich bread treat?

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Cinnamon rolls have been a staple in many a grandmother's kitchen. With the advent of cinnamon rolls that were nearly as good from retail outlets, the home baked pastry has nearly disappeared. I wondered if this delicious memory from my past could be made even better by using my preferment of choice, poolish, to encourage flavor development. Would the subtle flavors created by slow fermentation be masked or completely lost by the addition of fats, milk and eggs? I had to see.

Origins of Poolish

Poolish is French for 'Polish' as Polish bakers are credited with the technique of creating a preferment that is about half water and half flour by weight. Frequently I am asked if poolish is like sourdough starter. The answer is yes and no. It is like sourdough starter in the obvious way - you use it like barm to begin your dough. It is unlike sourdough in the most important way. It is a product of commercial yeast and not wild yeast. Each batch is made as needed and you don't 'save back' some to start the next batch, though no doubt you could.

I always have a bowl or two of poolish available to make something unexpected and delicious on relatively short notice. The poolish is easy to make. The prep time is about 5 minutes. It will last for two to three days. If you don't get around to using it and have to throw it out you have wasted less than twenty five cents worth of raw materials (See basic poolish in the recipe box at lower left).

I began by gathering recipes from the internet and my substantial collection of cookbooks. Common ingredients were easy to see: sugar; eggs; milk; butter; vanilla; salt and occasionally citrus flavors. One recipe called for nutmeg while another incorporated pudding mix. Many required using liquid oil, melted butter or



Cinnamon rolls are a favorite on weekend mornings. Using the preferment poolish and make ahead finish mix adds nuttiness and convenience.

melted margarine. In my imagined roll I wanted the rich taste of butter and because I like slow fermentation, melting solid fat was out. I came upon a few recipes that creamed the butter. This turned out to be the method that would also help me produce a freezable 'finish mix' to be added to poolish at a later time.

A Weighty Subject

My favorite recipes to work with use weights given in grams. In the United States this feature is rare, but I'm giving you the final recipe using both metric weights and traditional measures. I like weighing and using grams

because scaling up or down is easier. More importantly in recipe development ingredient control is more precise. Weighing helps you calculate and adjust ratios in the formula.

While I always weigh bulky dry ingredients like flour, dry milk and sugar, for less bulky dry substances it is sometimes better to use teaspoons and tablespoons. Even with these I have a conversion chart to help define ratios.

In my search for the ultimate cinnamon roll several versions of dough were made up and disqualified. Too much fat and the dough would be heavy, too much sugar in the dough and the filling could be overpowered by the bread.

Milk was a common ingredient, and I knew from previous bread making projects that scalding the milk is the only way to minimize fresh milk's interference with the yeast's activity. I resolved to use milk

because it adds a nice richness but decided on dry milk for my final recipe. Dry milk is more convenient, won't interfere with the yeast the way fresh milk does and doesn't add moisture to the final dough.

Creaming Ingredients

I began by whipping 100 grams of softened unsalted butter (not quite a stick) in the standing mixer bowl until it was light and lemon color. Stopping the mixer, I added 100 grams (not quite a half cup) granulated sugar and whipped that a little more. For moisture and richness, I went an egg (about 60 grams) and a teaspoon of vanilla. The last ingredients in this step were 100 grams (about 1 1/4 cup) of dry milk and the zest of an orange.

Why start with 100 gram units of the butter, sugar and milk? It is just a starting point and a reasonable amount of these ingredients. It is also easy to adjust.

Sticky Dough

I wanted his dough to be sticky. Working with rustic dough teaches a baker of artisan breads that wet dough will have lighter structure than a stiffer mix. To find out how much additional flour I'd need to use to get a manageable but wet dough, I mixed this creamed fat/egg substance with the poolish using the flat beater. This resulted a very wet sticky mess that I knew would need more flour. The question was: how much? I weighed out 500 grams of flour in a bowl and added two teaspoons of yeast and stirred. By adding this flour mix a little at a time to the cinnamon roll dough I would determine a starting point for additional flour. In my first try it took 400 grams (about 2 3/4 cups) to get a dough the consistency I wanted.

After generously dusting the counter, I floured the outside of the dough ball and began to roll it out. A five or ten minute rest made working with the

Basic Small Batch Poolish (makes about 750 grams) © 2007 Bread Technique

Mix together in a 2 quart bowl to heavy pancake batter consistency:

2 1/2 cups (350 grams) bread flour
pinch of yeast (1/8 tsp or a little less)
14 ounces of good tasting water (400 ml)

Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and leave on the counter overnight (8-12 hours).

in 8-12 hours it will be double in bulk, bubbly and will resemble tapioca pudding.

Move the poolish to the refrigerator to store it there for up to three days.

After three days it will be come more sour and separated, but can be used for bagels or bread.

After six days it is probably best to discard it even for bread use.

Cinnamon Nut Filling

In a food processor place (in this order so cinnamon won't dust up):

1 1/2 tbs (15 grams) good quality cinnamon
3/4 cup granulated sugar (150 grams)

Pulsing the food processor, dribble in:

4 tbs canola or corn oil

Remove the sugar and cinnamon mixture to a 2 quart mixing bowl.

Place 4 cups (380-400 grams) whole pecans into the food processor and coarsely chop them.

Stir nuts into cinnamon and sugar mixture along with a pinch of salt.

dough much easier. It was a little surprising how much dough was created. This dough was easily rolled to about 14 inches by 34 inches.

Sprinkling flour on the dough kept the rolling pin free and using a bench scraper to separate the dough from the counter was sometimes needed. The dough tore occasionally and as I pieced the tear back together I decided to reduce the dry milk and increase the flour.

For a filling I sprinkled the rectangle of rolled out dough with the same cinnamon sugar we use for cinnamon toast, then had to make more! It was a little bland and I realized that we never really measure the cinnamon but just guess at the proportion. Nailing down a proportion of sugar to cinnamon would yield consistency. The magic ratio seemed to be ten parts sugar to one part cinnamon by weight.

All of this handling had warmed the dough and it was beginning to proof. Clearly less yeast would be needed in the finish step to slow things down a bit.

I rolled the rectangle and cinnamon onto itself like a jelly roll. The cylinder before me was nearly a yard long! I sliced it all the way through every two inches, using a yard stick as a guide. As each piece was placed cut side down on a half sheet pan lined with parchment, the spiral was beautiful. A light coating of cooking spray and a loose covering of plastic wrap would keep the rolls from drying while they were allowed to proof on the counter for about 90 minutes. About 45 minutes into the proofing I turned on the oven.

When proofed until nearly double and baked for twenty-five minutes at 375 °F the doughy spirals turned into reasonable cinnamon rolls. They tasted pretty good too, but it seemed as though the flavor I liked best in the dough - the citrus zest - was being masked by the vanilla. The dough was a little dense too. I decided to roll the dough a little thinner.

The Adjustments Began

In version two I dropped the dry milk to 50 grams and omitted the vanilla. I also cut the yeast down to 1 teaspoon to slow down the counter proofing. The reduction of the dry milk increased the amount of flour needed to 455 grams to get the right consistency.

The dough rolled better with the reduced amount of dry milk. It was still necessary to add flour to the surface occasionally and turn it over, but less often it seemed. I determined one more milk reduction would be in order. I took the dry milk down to 40 grams. That was about half a cup and a convenient unit for those who measure.

I used a half cup of the 10:1 cinnamon sugar and got a decent product. My wife tasted them and said, 'Next time make some with pecans, please'. I had a new ingredient. Interesting! Then she added "and a lot more sugar and cinnamon." She was right on both counts. Her suggestions made a big difference.

The final recipe was coming together after about a dozen attempts by increasing this and lowering that. In the end my final recipe can be used by bakers who prefer measuring devices and those using a scale. In the final formula the butter became a full stick (113 grams), the sugar was upped to ½ cup (115 grams) and the dry milk reduced to 1/2 cup (40 grams). The flour had increased to 480 grams (3 1/4 cups). So far, so good. But the biggest change was to the filling which tripled to 1 ½ cups (300 grams) cinnamon sugar, 3 Tbs (30 grams) of cinnamon and four cups of pecans.

Finish Mix Strategies

Poolish is an ideal first step for many bread projects because it is so wet that you can make just about anything with it, and I DO. Usually all of the ingredients except the poolish can be brought together in to a dry mixture and stored for later use in the freezer or refrigerator. When warmed to room temperature and added all at once to warmed poolish you can dramatically reduced the time it takes to get to good bread products on the day you need them. I already had a formula for bagels, french bread,

ciabatta and one to make pizza or focaccia dough. Cinnamon roll dough is enriched with fat, milk and egg and I knew this might prove to be a challenge.

I was pleasantly surprised. It was simply a matter of putting all the ingredients together minus the poolish and documenting the process.

Cinnamon Roll Finish Mix

That final formula can be found below (lower right corner) in a convenient recipe card size. While it can be made and immediately used, this same mixture stores well for later use.

Attach the standing mixer's whisk. Cream one stick of unsalted butter about a minute on high then stop the mixer. Add ½ cup of sugar and 2 ½ tsp salt and blend for a minute on high. Next add one egg and blend on medium for a minute. With the addition of ½ cup of instant dry milk and the zest of one orange you are ready for a final blend on medium with the whisk attachment. Lower the bowl and remove the whisk attachment.

Add 3 1/4 leveled cups (480 grams) of bread flour to the mixer bowl and sprinkle one teaspoon of instant dry yeast on top of the flour. Attach the flat beater, raise the bowl and turn the mixer on low. In about a minute the mixture will resemble coarse cornmeal. This is cinnamon roll finish mix to be used with a small batch (750 grams) of poolish!

Final Assembly

Lower the bowl, remove the flat beater and dismount the bowl. Adding the poolish without dismounting the bowl will almost certainly result in spill. When adding the poolish use a bowl scraper or spatula to get every last bit. As poolish ages in the refrigerator it can separate. If this has happened be sure to use all of the liquid too.

Remount the bowl, attach the flat beater and raise the bowl. Turn the mixer on low for about a minute until the finish mix and poolish begin to form a ball. Switch to the dough hook.

Turn on the mixer to the knead setting (consult your mixer manual) and knead the dough for about four minutes.

Turn the mixer off and walk away! Give the dough 10 to 20 minutes to hydrate. The technical term for this is autolyse. This dough is very wet and at this stage covering with plastic wrap for up to 20 minutes is not necessary.

When you do turn the mixer back on you'll notice an immediate difference. The rest has relaxed the gluten strands and fully incorporated the water into the flour.

Knead with the mixer for about four to six more minutes till the dough is smooth. Remove the dough hook from the dough. Dismount the mixer bowl and lightly

spray the dough with cooking spray. Cover the dough with plastic wrap. Let the dough rise for about 60 to 90 minutes in the mixer bowl til double in bulk.

During the proofing period make the cinnamon nut spread (see recipe box lower left).

Get out your Rolling Pin!

Flour the counter generously. Using a bowl scraper, remove the dough from the mixer bowl and place it on the floured counter. Coat the dough with flour on all sides and pat into a rough rectangle. With the rolling pin, roll the dough to roughly 14 inches by 26 inches. Sprinkle a little additional flour on the top surface of the dough occasionally and then turn the dough over. Continue rolling the dough out. When finished the dough will be a bit under 1/2 inch thick. If the dough becomes difficult to work with, cover it with plastic wrap and give it a 10 minute rest. When the rolling is completed pour on the cinnamon and nut filling and distribute it evenly. Pick up the long edge and roll it toward you as you would a jelly roll.

Prepare a half sheet baking pan by covering it with baking parchment. Cut off and discard about an inch of dough from each end. Cut the rolled up dough into 2" segments using a yard stick as a guide. Set the individual rolls, cut side down, on the parchment. twelve rolls will fit on a single half sheet pan.

Spray the rolls with cooking spray and cover loosely with plastic wrap. Let them rise for 90 minutes or until double in size. Remove the plastic wrap and place the pan in a pre-heated 425 °F oven and immediately back the temperature to 375 °F to keep from the rolls from burning.

After ten or twelve minutes in the oven, rotate the pan 180 degrees. This will help promote even browning. After about twenty minutes start watching the baking progress. In about twenty-five minutes the cinnamon rolls should be golden brown and very aromatic! Ovens vary and so will baking times.

When you remove the cinnamon rolls from the oven take them from the pan and place them on a cooling rack. The baking parchment makes this easy!

Cool the finished product for ten to fifteen minutes to allow the steamy moisture to distribute within the bread layers. While the rolls are cooling make a simple glaze with 1 cup of confectioners sugar and two tablespoons of milk to drizzle on the cooled rolls.

You'll be surprised how good these cinnamon rolls can be. How do your cinnamon rolls stack up with those your grandmother made? Maybe your rolls are as good as hers, but she doesn't have to know - unless you take her some!

Cinnamon Roll Finish Mix

Cream together with the whisk attachment in a standing mixer:

- 1 stick (113 grams) unsalted butter
- ½ cup (115 grams) granulated sugar
- 2 ½ tsp (18 grams) salt
- 1 large egg (60 grams)
- ½ cup Instant dry milk (40 grams)
- Zest of one medium or large orange

Add and combine using the flat beater attachment:

- 3 1/4 Cups (480 grams) bread flour
- 1 tsp (3 grams) instant yeast

Mix until the contents of the bowl resembles coarse cornmeal

Procedure Summary

Mixture can be bagged and stored for later use in the freezer for three months or in the refrigerator for two weeks. Allow to warm and become soft and pliable before adding to a small batch (see reverse) room temperature poolish in the standing mixer bowl. Mix on low for one minute with flat beater, switch to dough hook, knead for three minutes, rest for 10 minutes, knead additional 4-6 minutes.

Proof in mixing bowl on counter till double in bulk. Dough will be tacky, pliable and ready to roll with rolling pin on heavily flour dusted surface. Roll dough to a size of about 14" x 26". Spread cinnamon filling (see box at left). Roll up like jelly roll, slice off and discard about 1 inch from each end. Slice remaining dough into two inch segments. Place cut rolls on baking sheet lined with parchment about 1 ½ inches apart. Proof until touching and bake at 375 for about 25 minutes rotating once.

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