

Steamed Bread Loaf (Mantao) Recipe

Ingredients:

2 cups plain or all-purpose flour
½ cup strong bread flour
½ cup sugar
4 teaspoons baking powder
½ cup lukewarm milk
¼ cup lukewarm water
2½ tablespoons lard or peanut oil

Method:

Mix the flours, sugar, and baking powder together on a work surface. Make a well in the middle and add the milk gradually, combining it with your fingers. After the milk has been absorbed, add the water and with your fingers continue to work the dough. Add the lard and again, with your fingers, continue to work the dough until well blended. Using a dough scraper, gather the dough in one hand and begin kneading with the other. If the dough is dry and shows traces of flour, add another bit of water. Knead for 12 to 15 minutes. If the dough is still dry, add 1 teaspoon of water at a time and continue to knead until the dough becomes elastic. If the dough is too wet, sprinkle a bit of flour on the work surface and on your hands and continue to work the dough. When the dough is elastic, cover with a damp cloth and allow to rest for 1 hour. To make the loaves, divide the dough into 2 equal parts. Roll each into a cylinder 12 inches long, then divide each cylinder into 3 equal pieces. Dough that is not being worked on should be covered with a damp cloth. With wet hands, shape each piece to create a small loaf, pressing and rounding the ends. Place each loaf on a rectangular piece of parchment or wax paper, 5 inches by 2½ inches (the paper should be larger than the loaf). Repeat with 2 other cut pieces and with the 3 from the other cylinder. You will have 6 loaves. Place the loaves into 2 bamboo steamers, 3 in each, tiered, cover, and steam for 20 to 25 minutes on high heat. When done, the loaves become soft and sponge-like. Occasionally, because of flour and climate variations, the loaf will open in the top during steaming, a natural occurrence. Turn off the heat, remove from the steamer, slice and serve.

Note: The dough for this bread must be used within 1 to 2 hours of the time it is made. It cannot be frozen. The loaves, however, can be frozen, wrapped in plastic wrap, then foil. To prepare, bring to room temperature, then steam.

This is the basic steamed bread of Beijing but is eaten widely in Shanghai, as are variations of it in Sichuan and Hunan. The basic dough, with its bleached flour base, can be used for filled buns as well. Throughout China, particularly in the North, small, sculpted steamed breads are served as accompaniments to festive, classic dishes such as Peking Duck, Tea-Smoked Duck, Crisp Cantonese Chicken, and Roasted Suckling Pig.