



# **REAL VIETNAMESE COOKING**

**HOMESTYLE RECIPES FROM HANOI TO HO CHI MINH**



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# **REAL VIETNAMESE COOKING**

by TRACEY LISTER & ANDREAS POHL

For our daughter, Franka

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# BALANCE & HARMONY

## A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO VIETNAMESE CUISINE



Tracey and I are often asked to describe Vietnamese food and it is a question we always find difficult to answer. How is it even possible to define a national cuisine with the breadth and depth of Vietnamese food? A cuisine that encompasses food from both the mountains close to the Chinese and Lao borders and from a 3400 kilometre-long coastline. A cuisine that is marked by both the four seasons of the Red River Delta in the north and the tropical wet and dry seasons of the Mekong Delta in the south. A cuisine that has assimilated an array of culinary influences ranging from French and Chinese cooking to Khmer and Cham food traditions.

We feel that the most fitting phrase to describe the common characteristics within all that diversity is “understated elegance”, because as a national cuisine, Vietnamese dishes combine simplicity with sophistication and display a light touch even in the more rustic dishes. It is a food culture that has been shaped by a subtropical climate, a long history of wet rice cultivation and the ability to readily absorb foreign influences.

Rice, fish and herbs are the cornerstones of Vietnamese cuisine. Wet rice cultivation requires a lot of terrain and there is very little tradition of animal husbandry given the scarcity of land not earmarked for growing the nation’s staple. Meat is used sparingly, mainly for an additional layer of taste and texture and, in the past, it was mainly reserved for guests, pregnant women, children and the ill.

Only since the French colonised the country and the Vietnam War has there been more emphasis on eating meat. Western eating habits have been responsible for new, phonetic word creations in the Vietnamese language such as “bit tet” for beef steak or “xuc xich” for sausage, illustrating how the consumption of beef and pork has assumed greater importance.

In a country dotted with ponds and paddies, crisscrossed by rivers and canals and bordered on the east by a 3400 kilometre long coastline, however, it is no surprise that fish and crustaceans are the main source of protein. And that includes the ever-present fish sauce, nuoc mam: the slightly pungent mainstay of Vietnamese cuisine and an ingredient in virtually every recipe.

Yet what really sets Vietnamese cuisine apart from the food of other countries in the region is its judicious use of aromatics. Visit any market and you will find stalls laden with bunches of fresh herbs in vibrant shades of green. It is herbs such as coriander (cilantro), fragrant knotweed and mint that give Vietnamese dishes that certain finesse, often arising from the surprising interplay between strong tastes such as nuoc mam and the delicate flavours and aromas of these leaves.

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VIETNAMESE DISHES COMBINE SIMPLICITY WITH  
SOPHISTICATION AND DISPLAY A LIGHT TOUCH,  
EVEN WITH THE MORE RUSTIC DISHES

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Acculturation is the final building block of the country's cuisine, with the locals adopting foreign influences and twisting them to meet their tastes. Even Vietnam's most famous dish, pho, is a product of acculturation, marrying Chinese and French influences to create something uniquely Vietnamese.

The Chinese occupied the country for more than 1000 years and had a strong influence on Vietnamese cooking, but their influence also serves as a good example of how very selective the Vietnamese are in what they choose to adopt. While happy to embrace new cooking techniques and utensils such as the steamer and the wok, the Vietnamese stopped short of taking on board other culinary customs.

Traditionally, Chinese food is characterised by its intricate, complicated cooking methods and rare and expensive ingredients, from which it derives much of its prestige. The Vietnamese, in contrast, insist that they have retained a people's cuisine based on the delicate combination of simple and accessible ingredients. Interestingly, notwithstanding Vietnam's rapid economic growth, peasant food such as Cabbage with Nuoc Mam and Boiled Duck Eggs, is starting to appear on the menus of fashionable city restaurants. "Maybe rich people are looking for a more authentic experience nowadays," muses Hanoi veteran publicist Huu Ngoc about this recent phenomenon which sits well with the nostalgic idealisation of the countryside and village life in Vietnam.

While the Vietnamese rejected the Chinese traditions of manipulating exotic ingredients, they readily integrated Chinese spiritual traditions into their food philosophy: the impact of Taoism and particularly Confucianism can be clearly seen in Vietnamese cooking.

One key concept of Taoism is the notion of complementary opposites, best illustrated in the famous Yin and Yang emblem. This idea extends to eating, with food being categorised as either "cold" or "hot". In keeping with the Taoist philosophy of uniting opposites, a healthy diet should include both. Pineapple, for example, is considered "cold" and is therefore served with a "hot" chilli and salt dip. For the same reasons, "cold" snails are often paired with "hot" ginger.

The influence of Confucianism is even more pronounced and the figure of 5 plays a central role. In Confucian philosophy the natural world is made up of five elements — wood, fire, earth, metal and water — and everything follows on from there. A balanced meal should contain five nutrients (carbohydrates, fat, protein, minerals and water) and should appeal to all five senses, including sound, smell and sight. This might explain the fact that eating noisily is not necessarily frowned upon and that the fashion of intricate vegetable carving discarded in the West is popular in Vietnam.

Most importantly, however, a complete meal must include all five tastes — sour, bitter, sweet,

spicy and salty. Hence the great importance of the dipping sauces which make up any tastes missing from the main dishes. For only with the harmony of all five flavours can one achieve the perfection of a Vietnamese meal.



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# ABOUT THIS BOOK

*REAL VIETNAMESE COOKING* IS ABOUT THE DISHES WE LOVE AND THE RECIPES WE HAVE COLLECTED OVER THE MANY YEARS WE HAVE BEEN LIVING AND TRAVELLING IN THIS DIVERSE AND VIBRANT COUNTRY

It is about the memorable meals we have had at street stalls, countryside eateries, *bia hois* and family gatherings which piqued our culinary interests. It also covers the three main culinary regions of the country: the hearty food of the cooler North, dishes from the Centre with its tradition of the imperial cuisine from Hue, and the sweeter and spicier food from the tropical South. The recipes range from classic Vietnamese fare such as Beef Noodle Soup (Pho Bo), Spring Rolls (Nem) and Banana Flower Salad as well as lesser known recipes like Eel in Caul Fat and Boiled Jackfruit Seeds.

While we have retained the traditional chapter headings such as Pork, Beef and Goat, and Fish and Crustaceans, they are more of a guide rather than a definitive description. The recipes are grouped according to their dominant ingredient. In this way, Prawn and Pork Broth with Rice Noodles (Hu Tieu) is listed under Fish and Crustaceans, because the broth is flavoured with dried squid. My Quang Noodles with Prawn and Pork, in contrast, can be found in the Pork, Beef and Goat chapter, because of its straightforward pork broth.

Curiously for a country with a Buddhist tradition, there are very few strictly vegetarian dishes, apart from the quite specialised vegan pagoda cooking. The reason for this is probably that vegetarianism is practised mainly on significant days of the lunar calendar as an exercise of abstinence rather than as a lifestyle. Even vegetable dishes that contain no meat or seafood will quite likely have been prepared with fish sauce. Therefore, we have called this chapter more broadly Vegetables and Salads and it also includes tofu dishes. However, many of the recipes can be adapted to meet a strict vegetarian diet.

The fact that rice is so central to the Vietnamese cuisine warranted a discrete chapter and the all-important dipping sauces, without which no Vietnamese dish would be complete, are also listed separately and are cross-referenced as part of the main dishes with which they are paired.

Traditionally, a Vietnamese meal finishes with platters of freshly cut fruit. The recipes in the Sweets chapter are normally eaten as snacks throughout the day, yet each of them would also be a perfectly suitable way to conclude a meal.

When Vietnamese sit down to eat, it is a communal affair, where family and friends share the food placed in the centre of the table, taking small morsels from the serving platters and bowls, one at a time. There is no hierarchical order of entrée and mains in Vietnamese cuisine. Dishes come out at the same time or whenever they are ready. The only exception is steamed rice which is served at the end of the meal together with a broth (canh).

In keeping with the communal theme, the recipes in the book will serve six unless otherwise stated. Noodle or bowl dishes like Pho Bo, Bun Cha and My Quang are generally not served as part of a banquet, but are eaten individually.

To put together a banquet, select four or five dishes covering different cooking techniques and ingredients. A typical selection would be spring rolls, a fried or grilled meat or fish dish, a braised or



stir-fried dish such as tofu with pork and a salad or vegetable dish. This selection should be accompanied by rice and, if you like, a canh. Alternatively, for a quicker and more casual meal, you could select one or two dishes and serve them with rice.

# VIVE LA FRANCE!

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IN OUR EARLY YEARS IN VIETNAM WE LOVED TO GO TO A HIDDEN RESTAURANT CALLED LA BIBLIOTHEQUE WHENEVER WE FOUND OURSELVES IN HO CHI MINH CITY. IT WAS CENTRALLY LOCATED IN A FRENCH VILLA CLOSE TO THE CATHEDRAL, BUT STILL HARD TO FIND WITHOUT ANY SIGNAGE.

The place was run by Madame Dai, a lawyer and politician in South Vietnam from a prominent, French educated family. Forbidden from practising law after the communist victory in 1975, she turned the library of the family home into a clandestine restaurant to make ends meet, serving simple bistro classics such as casseroles and coq-au-vin. An evening at La Bibliotheque was like stepping back in time, sitting at one of only six tables surrounded by dusty legal tomes in glassed-in bookcases. A slight woman with a patrician air, dressed in a traditional Ao Dai, Madame Dai would personally host the small number of patrons fluently conversing in French. The restaurant closed in 2000 and Madame Dai passed away not long after, in a small way symbolising the end of the colonial century in Vietnam.

French merchants and missionaries sought economic and political inroads in Vietnam as early as the 17th century. In fact, a French Catholic priest, Alexandre de Rhode, is credited with inventing the romanised script which replaced the Chinese-style Nom ideograms.

France's colonial adventure started in earnest with the attack on the port city of Danang in 1858 and finished with the inglorious defeat of French paratroopers near Dien Bien Phu in the northern highlands. Colonisation initially focused on the south, driven by the impossible dream of using the Mekong River as a trade route to China. Realising the Mekong River was too treacherous, the French turned their attention to the north, pushing to open the Red River to international trade instead. After three decades of gunboat diplomacy and many treaties, they finally brought the entire country under French control in 1895, renaming the south Cochin China, the centre Annam and the north Tonkin.

As colonial masters the French were not very interested in establishing industry, but keen to export rice, rubber and other agricultural products back to Europe. They were also keen to remodel Saigon and Hanoi in their own image. French villas still give the capital much of its old-world charm, as do the scaled-down replicas of the Cathedral of Notre Dame and the Paris Opera House. For entertainment, the French even built a velodrome and racetrack. The residence of the French Governor-General turned out to be so palatial that when Ho Chi Minh became president of Vietnam in 1954, he famously refused to live in such colonial splendour, preferring a simple, traditional stilt house.

To pay for these ambitious buildings, the French imposed high taxes on the local population and turned salt and alcohol production into state monopolies.

Salt producers had to sell their products to a state company at a fixed price. This had far-reaching consequences for a country which at the time consumed more than double the amount of salt per person than the average European. The two main sources of protein in Vietnamese cuisine, fish sauce and preserved fish, required copious amounts of salt and suddenly became almost unaffordable for locals. The colonial administration also banned traditional rice wine distilling in the villages in an attempt to force the Vietnamese to buy the much stronger, industrially produced liquor from a licensed French company.

Not only did these policies turn scores of villagers into salt smugglers and bootleggers, they also ensured there wasn't much love lost between the locals and the French - which fortunately did not

prevent the Vietnamese from borrowing from their cuisine. While the French mostly stayed away from the local fare, preferring a diet based on imported tinned goods, the Vietnamese freely experimented with the new, European foods: kohlrabi with tofu, baguette made with rice flour, pâté with fish sauce and coriander (cilantro), spring rolls with mayonnaise or cha ca with dill.

French influences on Vietnamese cuisine are manifold, ranging from a love of crème caramel and coffee to cooking with wine and beer. France's most enduring culinary legacy, however, might well be the humble tin of sweetened, condensed milk. It all started with an advertising campaign by French brand La Petite Fermière in 1915 which initially marketed it as a health drink for children. Condensed milk certainly hit the sweet tooth of young and old Vietnamese alike. It is still used in sweets, desserts and particularly with coffee, and has maintained its incredible popularity long past the demise of colonial Indochine.



# BOILED RICE

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Cơm trắng



Boiled rice is the backbone of Vietnamese cuisine, and the most common way of enjoying rice as part of a Vietnamese meal.

**SERVES 6**

600 G (1 LB 5 OZ/3 CUPS) LONG-GRAIN WHITE RICE

Put the rice in a large colander or sieve and rinse under cold running water. Place your hand in the centre of the rice and move it in a circular motion to make sure the water runs freely over all the rice. When the water runs clear, allow the rice to drain.

Transfer the rice to an electric rice cooker and cover with water. The water should come up to the first knuckle when the tip of your index finger is resting on top of the rice. Cook according to the rice cooker's instructions.

Alternatively, place the rice and 1.125 litres (38 fl oz/4½ cups) water in a saucepan and bring to the boil. Cover immediately and reduce the heat. Simmer for 20 minutes, then allow the rice to rest for a further 10 minutes before serving.

# BROKEN RICE

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Cơm tấm



Traditionally, it was very difficult for farmers to sell rice that had been broken during the harvest, so they mostly ate it themselves. Later it became part of a cheap worker's lunch, and over time city dwellers developed a taste for it, in part as a nostalgic reminder of a simpler country life.

You normally buy the rice already broken — but if you aren't able to obtain any, you can simply break some white rice yourself using a mortar and pestle.

**SERVES 6**

400 G (14 OZ/2 CUPS) BROKEN LONG-GRAIN WHITE RICE

Put the rice in a fine colander or sieve and rinse under cold running water. Run your fingers through the rice to ensure the water runs over all the grains, to wash away the starch. When the water runs clear, drain the rice for a few moments.

Transfer the rice to an electric rice cooker and pour in 625 ml (21 fl oz/2½ cups) water. Cook according to the rice cooker's instructions.

Alternatively, place the rice and 625 ml (21 fl oz/2½ cups) water in a saucepan and bring to the boil. Cover immediately and reduce the heat. Simmer for 20 minutes, then allow the rice to rest for a further 10 minutes before serving.

# CRISPY RICE FROM THE POT

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Cơm cháy



We like this rice with braised meats, or to scoop up one of the salads from this boob.

It takes a bit of practice to lift the rice out of the pot in one piece. Don't worry if it doesn't work the first time: it still tastes the same, even if it breaks up!

## SERVES 6

600 G (1 LB 5 OZ/3 CUPS) LONG-GRAIN WHITE RICE

$\frac{1}{3}$  TEASPOON SALT

60 ML (2 FL OZ/ $\frac{1}{4}$  CUP) VEGETABLE OIL

Put the rice in a large colander or sieve and rinse under cold running water. Place your hand in the centre of the rice and move it in a circular motion to make sure the water runs freely over all the rice. When the water runs clear, allow the rice to drain.

Transfer the rice to a saucepan and cover with 1.125 litres (38 fl oz/ $4\frac{1}{2}$  cups) water. Bring to the boil then cover immediately with a tight-fitting lid and reduce the heat to a simmer.

Cook for 18 minutes, then turn the heat up and cook for a final 2 minutes. Remove from the heat and let the rice rest for 10 minutes before serving.

Scoop the rice from the pan, except for the rice that has stuck to the base and side.

Return the pan to the heat. Season the rice in the pan with the salt and a pinch of freshly ground black pepper. Run the oil down the side and onto the base of the pan.

Cook until the rice lifts away from the pan and has a golden brown colour and crisp texture.

# FRIED STICKY RICE

Cơm nếp chiên



Usually served with grilled meats, sticky rice also makes a healthy snack. When it is fried, you should end up with delicious pillows of creamy rice within a crisp, golden crust. In Vietnam, this dish is often accompanied by a cold beer or two.

## SERVES 6

500 G (1 LB 2 OZ/2½ CUPS) GLUTINOUS RICE

½ TEASPOON SALT

50 G (1¾ OZ/¾ CUP) SPLIT, PEELED YELLOW MUNG BEANS

1 TEASPOON BAKING POWDER

VEGETABLE OIL, FOR DEEP-FRYING

[SOY CHILLI DIPPING SAUCE](#), TO SERVE

Wash the rice under cold running water until the water runs clear. Place in a saucepan or electric rice cooker, then add 750 ml (25½ fl oz/3 cups) water and the salt. Cook for 30 minutes, then drain well and place in a large sturdy bowl.

Meanwhile, put the mung beans in a saucepan and cover with cold water. Bring to the boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for about 15 minutes, until the beans are soft. Drain and add to the rice, along with the baking powder.

Using a pestle, work the rice mixture until all the grains are broken and the ingredients combined.

Transfer the mixture to a tray measuring 30 cm x 24 cm (12 inches x 9½ inches), and at least 4 cm (1½ inches) deep.

Smooth out with dampened hands. Chill in the refrigerator for about 4 hours, or until set.

When the rice has set, heat about 10 cm (4 inches) of oil in a wok or large saucepan over high heat.

Cut the rice into 5 cm (2 inch) batons, or use a spoon to scoop out the rice into ball shapes.

Immediately add the rice portions to the hot oil and cook in batches until lightly coloured. Remove from the oil and drain on paper towel.

Arrange the fried sticky rice on a platter and encourage diners to dip their portions in the dipping sauce.



# GRAINS OF LIFE

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LEGENDARY HANOIAN PUBLICIST HUU NGOC RECALLS THAT AS A CHILD HE ONCE ACCIDENTALLY DROPPED SOME GRAINS OF RICE ON THE FLOOR. HIS MOTHER CLIPPED HIM AROUND THE EARS AND SCOLDED HIM WITH THE WORDS: 'EVERY GRAIN OF RICE IS LIKE A PEARL!'

This anecdote illustrates the high regard in which this everyday food staple is held, in a country whose culture has been defined by millennia of wet rice cultivation.

Rice does, quite simply, belong to the very fabric of Vietnamese life. No meal is complete without rice. No wedding, no funeral, no New Year's Eve celebration can be held without a rice dish carrying special meaning. Rice is turned into flour, paper, noodles and even into alcohol. Almost half the population is connected with rice production in one way or another. Rice is everywhere. In the countryside, every available plot of land seems to be turned into a rice paddy, to the point where currently more than 1.2 million hectares of farmland are devoted to growing this grain.

Rice is considered a gift from the gods, and many myths and rituals illustrate its importance. One of the most endearing and poignant traditions is that the King himself had to be the first person to plough a rice paddy at the beginning of the lunar year.

Glutinous rice was the first variety under cultivation, with hard rice being introduced much later. Despite that late arrival, hard rice quickly overtook the sticky varieties in importance as it was easier to grow and had a much higher yield. Sticky rice was soon used mainly for special occasions such as ancestor worship and other rites and celebrations. By the late 18th century, some 70 different rice strains were under cultivation, and a cookbook written by the scholar Le Huu Trac in 1760 contained no less than 16 different recipes for cooking glutinous rice.

Historians have long assumed that the Chinese, who had been practising irrigation agriculture in the Yellow River Valley before invading Vietnam in the first century AD, introduced rice to the Red River Delta. More recent archaeological finds, however, show evidence of domestication of wild rice on the slopes north of the Red River as early as 4000 BC. Dykes, initially built as protection against flooding, were later used to regulate irrigation.

The influences of rice cultivation on Vietnam's culture might even run deeper than myths, history and traditions. Huu Ngoc maintains that growing rice and the village culture associated with it have formed the national character itself. Centuries of toiling in the paddies have ingrained the ethics of hard work and of valuing collective needs over individual ones, as well as a belief in the necessity of cooperation.

Being a foodstuff and a national symbol has also turned this humble staple into a political subject matter. Preoccupied with nation building, 19th century emperor Minh Mang promoted a unified national cuisine based on wet rice, fish sauce and the use of chopsticks. Ever since, the foundations of political power in Vietnam have firmly sat in the nation's rice paddies.

The political travails of his successor, emperor Gia Long, provides a case in point. Faced with the dilemma of whether to ship the surplus rice from the fertile Mekong region up north to shore up his political rule or to sell it off to other countries for hard cash, his solution was to officially ban export but turn a blind eye to members of his dynasty selling the grains on the sly.

The seesaw of abundance and scarcity has preoccupied the country's rulers and citizens ever since rice became a major trading commodity in the 19th century, and famines and shortages are still etched in the country's collective memory.

Most recently, the fact that after the Vietnam War, a country full of rice paddies had to import this staple triggered the Doi Moi policies of economic reforms in 1986, and set Vietnam on the path to becoming the second largest rice exporter globally that it is today.

# STICKY RICE

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Xôi



Sticky rice is ideal for soaking up the juices of your favourite dishes at the end of a meal.

**SERVES 6**

600 G (1 LB 5 OZ/3 CUPS) GLUTINOUS RICE

1 TEASPOON SALT

[PEANUT AND SESAME MIX](#), TO SERVE

Soak the rice in cold water for a minimum of 4 hours, or overnight if more convenient.

Drain the rice and rinse under cold water until the water runs clear.

Sprinkle the rice with the salt and place in a bamboo steamer lined with muslin (cheesecloth). Cover and steam for 30 minutes. Remove the lid from the steamer and check that the rice is cooked — it should be tender all the way through.

Serve immediately, or cover with a damp cloth to prevent the rice drying out and hardening.

Eat the rice with your fingers, dipping it into the peanut and sesame mix.

# STICKY RICE LOGS

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Xôi chiên



This is a snack from the countryside, easily transportable for workers to take to the rice paddies. It is great on its own, but can also be served as a side dish for grilled and fried meat or fish.

**SERVES 6**

555 G (1 LB 4 OZ/3 CUPS) [COOKED STICKY RICE](#)

125 ML (4 FL OZ/½ CUP) [RENDERED CHICKEN FAT](#)

Take a small handful of the cooked sticky rice and form into an oblong shape with damp fingers, applying a small amount of pressure so the grains stick together.

Heat the chicken fat in a frying pan and fry the rice logs in batches over high heat for about 3 minutes on each side, until slightly crunchy on the outside.

Serve warm or cold.

# RICE CRACKERS

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Bánh đa vừng



Buy some rice crackers from an Asian supermarket. Usually, two rice crackers for every three people is sufficient.

Cook the rice crackers for about 3 minutes, or until crisp and golden — either in a preheated 180°C (350°F) oven, or on a hot grill.

# VIETNAMESE BAGUETTE

Bánh mì



The French claim that the term ‘bánh mì’ is derived from ‘pain de mie’, both being sandwich loaves with soft centres. However, the rice flour gives the Vietnamese version of the French baguette its distinct thin, flaky crust.

## MAKES 6 ROLLS

375 G (13 OZ/2½ CUPS) PLAIN (ALL-PURPOSE) FLOUR

60 G (2 OZ/⅓ CUP) RICE FLOUR

2 TEASPOONS SUGAR

2 TEASPOONS SALT

340 ML (11½ FL OZ/1⅓ CUPS) LUKEWARM WATER

2 TEASPOONS (7 G) DRIED YEAST

Sift the flours, sugar and salt into a bowl and make a well in the centre. Whisk together the water and yeast, then pour the mixture into the well. Start in the centre of the well and incorporate the wet and dry ingredients with your hand. Move your hand in increasingly larger circles, slowly bringing the ingredients together.

Place the dough on a lightly floured work surface. Knead by stretching the dough away from you, then winding it back, rotating the dough as you go. Continue with this motion for about 8–10 minutes. You should end up with a smooth, elastic dough.

Place the dough in a bowl, cover with a damp cloth and leave in a warm, draught-free spot for about 1 hour, or until doubled in size.

Divide the dough into six equal portions. Roll each piece into a log shape and place on a sheet of baking paper. Leave in a warm spot to prove a second time, for 30–40 minutes.

Meanwhile, heat the oven to 220°C (430°F) and preheat a baking tray in the oven.

Test to see if the rolls are ready by lightly pressing the sides to form a dimple. If the dimple slowly fills out, the dough is ready. Using a sharp knife, score the bread from end to end, in one long line, but not too deep.

Slide the rolls, still on the baking paper, onto the preheated tray and into the oven. Have a small bowl of water at the ready and flick water into the oven before shutting the door. Bake the bread for 20 minutes, flicking water into the oven three more times for a crispy crust.

Slide the rolls off the tray and finish by baking them directly on the oven racks for an additional 5 minutes.

To test if they are cooked, tap the base of the rolls — you should hear a hollow sound.

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Remove from the oven and cool on a wire rack.

These baguettes are best enjoyed soon after making.





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