Bread & baking / Italy

Ciabatta

The slipper loaf — a wet, slack dough fermented with a poolish and folded rather than kneaded, baked into a blistered, flour-dusted crust over a crumb shot through with glassy, irregular holes. Tear it open and it should steam, smell of cream and wheat, and tug back like wet lace.

Time 1080 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 100 % Bread flour (high-protein, ~12.5%)
- ☐ 80 % Water (cool, for the poolish and dough)
- ☐ 0.6 % Instant dry yeast
- ☐ 2.2 % Fine sea salt
- ☐ 2 % Extra-virgin olive oil
- ☐ 4 % Semolina or rice flour (for dusting)

Let's make it.

01 The night before, build a poolish: whisk together a third of the flour, an equal weight of the water (so roughly 30% flour at 100% hydration), and a pinch of the yeast — about a fifth of the total. It should be a loose, pancake-thick batter. Cover and leave at cool room temperature for 12 to 16 hours. This long, slow pre-ferment is where the bread's flavor and extensibility are built; rushing it gives a bland, tight loaf.

02 Add the remaining flour, water, yeast, and the olive oil to the poolish and mix to a shaggy, sticky mass — no real kneading, just enough to hydrate every bit of flour. Cover and rest 20 minutes (an autolyse) so the flour fully absorbs water and the gluten begins to organize on its own. Then sprinkle the salt over the top and squeeze it through the dough with wet hands until evenly distributed. The dough will be very wet and slack; that high hydration is what makes ciabatta's open crumb, so resist adding flour.

03 Bulk-ferment in an oiled tub for about 2 to 3 hours at warm room temperature, building strength with stretch-and-folds instead of kneading. With a wet hand, grab one side of the dough, stretch it up, and fold it over the center; rotate the tub and repeat on all four sides. Do a full set of four folds every 30 minutes for the first 90 minutes, then leave the dough to rise undisturbed. Each fold tightens the gluten and traps gas; over the session the slack dough transforms into something jiggly, billowy, and full of air.

04 Generously flour your work surface and a couche or floured towel with the semolina or rice flour. Tip the dough out without punching it down — you want to keep the gas. Dust the top, then with a bench knife cut it into two or three rough rectangles, handling as little as possible. Stretch each gently into a slipper shape, transfer (flour-side down, then flipped at baking) onto the floured couche, and pleat the cloth between loaves. Proof 30 to 45 minutes until puffy and pillowy. Meanwhile heat the oven to 245°C (475°F) with a baking stone or steel and a steam pan.

05 Flip each loaf flour-side up onto a peel or parchment and slide onto the hot stone, keeping the slipper shape. Pour boiling water into the steam pan (or spritz the oven walls) and shut the door fast. Bake with steam for the first 10 minutes for maximum oven spring and blistering, then vent the steam and bake another 10 to 15 minutes until deeply golden and crackling. The loaves are done at an internal temperature of about 96–99°C (205–210°F). Cool fully on a rack — at least an hour — before tearing; the crumb is still setting inside.

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Servings are an estimate; check quantities in the source recipe.
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