Bread & baking / France

Pain au Lait

French milk bread rolls so impossibly pillowy that pulling one apart from the tray releases a cloud of buttery steam — enriched with whole milk, butter, and just enough sugar to make the crust gild golden, the crumb white and tender as a cloud.

Time 210 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 100 % Bread flour (12-13% protein)
- ☐ 55 % Whole milk, warmed to 38-40 C
- ☐ 1.5 % Active dry yeast
- ☐ 8 % Granulated sugar
- ☐ 1.8 % Fine sea salt
- ☐ 12 % Unsalted butter, softened (18-20 C)
- ☐ 2 large Egg (for dough and egg wash)

Let's make it.

01 Warm the milk gently to 38-40 C (body temperature — warm but not uncomfortable when dipped into with a wrist). Whisk in the sugar and active dry yeast and leave to stand for 8-10 minutes until a creamy, foamy layer forms across the surface. Milk's natural lactose and fat accelerate yeast activity significantly compared to a water-based activation — you should see full foam in 6-7 minutes. Beat one egg and set aside for the egg wash; add the second egg to the foamed milk and whisk briefly to combine before proceeding to mixing.

02 Combine flour and salt in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the dough hook (this enriched dough benefits from machine kneading, though hand-kneading is possible). Add the yeast-milk mixture and mix on low for 2 minutes until a shaggy dough forms, then increase to medium-low and knead for 5-6 minutes until the dough is smooth but still slightly tacky. Do not add butter yet — the fat must be incorporated after the gluten network is established. Adding butter too early prevents proper gluten development and produces a crumbly loaf.

03 With the mixer running on medium-low, add the softened butter in 4-5 small additions, allowing each piece to fully incorporate before adding the next. The dough will appear to fall apart as the fat coats the gluten strands — this is normal and temporary. After the final addition, increase to medium speed and knead for 6-8 more minutes until the dough is smooth, elastic, and pulls cleanly from the bowl — this is the window test for enriched dough. The finished dough will be noticeably softer, shinier, and more extensible than a lean dough. It should not be sticky at this stage.

04 Shape the dough into a ball, place in a buttered bowl, and turn once to coat. Cover with plastic wrap and let rise at warm room temperature (24-26 C) for 60-90 minutes, until the dough has doubled. Enriched doughs proof more slowly than lean doughs due to the fat and sugar inhibiting yeast activity — do not rush. A common error is baking an under-proofed enriched loaf and getting a dense, brioche-like brick. After the first rise, gently deflate the dough and divide into 12 equal portions (about 50-55g each if working with 500g flour).

05 Working on a lightly floured surface, flatten each portion gently into a small disc, then fold the edges into the center and flip so the seam is underneath. Cup your hand over the dough and rotate it with a circular motion on the un-floured part of the surface — the friction builds surface tension and pulls the roll into a tight, smooth sphere. Arrange the rolls in a lightly buttered baking dish with the rolls touching each other — this produces the characteristic pull-apart structure that makes pain au lait so comforting. Cover with a damp cloth and proof for 45-60 minutes at room temperature until visibly puffy and the rolls have grown into each other.

06 Preheat the oven to 180 C (360 F). Beat the reserved egg with a pinch of salt and gently brush each roll with a thin, even coat — do not press down hard or the rolls will deflate. Bake on the center rack for 18-22 minutes until the rolls are a rich golden-brown across the tops and the internal temperature reads 88-90 C (190-195 F). Enriched breads are done at a lower internal temperature than lean breads due to the fat and egg content. Cool in the pan for 5 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack. Pain au lait is best eaten warm or the same day, though a brief 10-second microwave on day two restores most of the original softness.

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