Bread & baking / Germany

Pretzel Rolls

German Laugenbrötchen — dense, mahogany-dark rolls submerged in a baked-soda lye bath that turns the outer starch into a crackle-crisp, bitterly savory shell over a chewy, pillowy interior, finished with coarse pretzel salt that glints under kitchen light.

Time 180 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 100 % Bread flour (12–13% protein)
- ☐ 55 % Warm whole milk (38 C)
- ☐ 1.5 % Instant yeast
- ☐ 2 % Fine sea salt
- ☐ 5 % Unsalted butter, softened
- ☐ 12 % Baking soda (for the lye bath)
- ☐ 500 % Water (for baked-soda bath)
- ☐ 1 % Coarse pretzel salt (or flaky sea salt)

Let's make it.

01 Combine the flour, yeast, and salt in a large bowl, then add the warm milk. Mix until a rough dough forms, then add the softened butter in pieces. Knead by hand for 10 minutes or in a stand mixer with the dough hook at medium speed for 7 minutes until the dough is smooth, elastic, and only faintly tacky. Pretzel dough is intentionally stiffer than a typical bread dough — the lower hydration is what allows the rolls to hold their shape during the lye bath and develop that distinctive dense, chewy crumb. The dough should pass the windowpane test: stretch a small piece thin and it should be nearly translucent without tearing.

02 Place the dough in a lightly oiled bowl, cover with plastic wrap, and let it rise at room temperature for 1 to 1.5 hours until 50% larger (not doubled — pretzel dough is kept relatively under-fermented by design). This controlled fermentation keeps the crumb dense and chewy rather than airy. Meanwhile, prepare the baked-soda bath: spread the baking soda on a foil-lined sheet pan and bake at 250 C (480 F) for 1 hour until it turns from white powder to a yellowish crust. Baked soda is significantly more alkaline than regular baking soda and gives a much closer result to a real lye bath.

03 Divide the dough into 8 equal pieces (about 80–100 g each for a typical batch from 500 g flour). To shape a round roll: flatten each piece into a disc, fold the edges toward the center all around, then flip it over and roll it under your cupped palm on the counter with firm downward pressure, moving in tight circles. The goal is a taut, smooth ball with a sealed seam on the bottom. Alternatively, score a deep cross on top with a sharp knife or lame after shaping — this gives the classic Laugenbrötchen look. Place shaped rolls seam-side down on a parchment-lined sheet and refrigerate uncovered for 30 minutes — cold rolls hold their shape better during the lye bath.

04 Dissolve the baked baking soda in 1 liter of water in a wide, non-reactive pot (stainless steel or enameled — no bare aluminum). Bring to a gentle simmer. Wearing rubber gloves (baked soda solution is still caustic to skin), lower the cold rolls into the simmering bath one or two at a time. Simmer 20–30 seconds per side, turning once. The surface will turn a slightly tan, rubbery, tight skin. Lift out with a slotted spoon or spider and place on a parchment-lined baking sheet. Scatter coarse salt over the tops immediately while the surface is tacky.

05 Bake on the upper-middle rack at 220 C (425 F) with no steam for 18–22 minutes until deeply, uniformly dark mahogany-brown — much darker than you would ever take a regular roll. The lye reaction produces the characteristic dark color and bitter-savory flavor as the gelatinized exterior caramelizes aggressively. The coarse salt should be lightly toasted but intact. Let the rolls cool on a rack for at least 15 minutes before eating — the interior crumb needs time to firm up and the crust to crackle fully as it cools.

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