Bread & baking / Germany

Bavarian Soft Pretzels

A twisted rope of lean dough bathed in lye solution bakes to a mahogany crust with a deep, alkaline tang, a chewy-dense crumb, and a snowfall of coarse salt that cracks between your teeth like edible gravel. This is the bread of Oktoberfest and every Bavarian beer hall worth its Weissbier.

Time 150 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 100 % Bread flour (12–13% protein)
- ☐ 60 % Warm water (32–35 C)
- ☐ 4 % Unsalted butter (softened)
- ☐ 2 % Fine sea salt
- ☐ 1.5 % Instant yeast
- ☐ 1 % Barley malt syrup (or brown sugar)
- ☐ 3 % Food-grade sodium hydroxide lye (3–4% solution in cold water — use gloves)
- ☐ 1 % Pretzel salt (coarse, extra-white laugenbrezel salt)

Let's make it.

01 Combine the flour, salt, and yeast in the bowl of a stand mixer (or a large mixing bowl). In a separate vessel, dissolve the malt syrup in the warm water, then add the softened butter in small pieces. Pour the liquid into the dry ingredients and mix on low speed with a dough hook for 2 minutes until the shaggy mass comes together. The dough should be noticeably stiffer than a bread or focaccia dough — this is intentional. A stiff dough holds the pretzel shape.

02 Knead on medium speed for 8–10 minutes (or 12–15 minutes by hand) until the dough is smooth, slightly tacky but not sticky, and passes the windowpane test: a small piece stretched between two thumbs and forefingers should stretch to a translucent membrane without tearing. The gluten development is essential — under-developed pretzel dough tears during shaping. Form into a ball, cover with a damp cloth, and let rest at room temperature for 1 hour until doubled.

03 Divide the rested dough into 8 equal pieces (about 100 g each for standard pretzels). Roll each piece into a rope 60–70 cm long, keeping the center thicker (about 3 cm diameter) and tapering to thin ends (5–7 mm). To form the pretzel: make a U-shape with the rope, cross the two ends twice (a double twist), then fold the twisted ends down and press them firmly onto the fat middle portion at the 4 and 8 o'clock positions. Press firmly — the seal must hold through boiling and baking. Place on parchment-lined baking sheets and refrigerate uncovered for 30 minutes to firm up before dipping.

04 SAFETY: Wear rubber gloves and eye protection. Prepare a 3–4% lye solution by adding sodium hydroxide to cold water (never the reverse — always add lye to water). Working with cold lye solution, briefly submerge each pretzel for 20–30 seconds per side, then transfer immediately to a lye-safe (non-reactive) surface or directly to parchment-lined baking trays. Alternatively, use baked baking soda solution (boil 1 L water with 60 g baked baking soda) for a safer but less dramatic crust. Score the fat belly with a sharp knife or lame in a single confident cut. Sprinkle with pretzel salt immediately.

05 Bake at 220 C (425 F) on the middle rack for 16–20 minutes until the belly is deeply mahogany and the twisted section has darkened further to near-black. The crust should sound hollow when tapped. The pretzel salt will have fused slightly into the surface. Remove and cool on a wire rack for at least 5 minutes. Bavarian pretzels are best eaten within 2 hours of baking — the crust softens as they cool and becomes leathery by the next day.

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