

Festive Bread

roska

Roska is a sweet festive bread; some variations are eaten simply day-to-day for breakfast or coffee, while more elaborate types are made for Jewish holidays and milestone events.

With origins in the Greek egg and sugar bread called *tsoureki*, this bread is typified by a slightly sweet flavour and long-stranded texture when broken apart. *Roska* is topped with sesame seeds, and traditionally whole blanched almonds are added for celebrations.

As in many religions and traditions, particularly in the east Mediterranean, bread plays an important and symbolic role in the Jewish tradition. For the blessing at the Friday night Sabbath meal, or the next day for brunch after the morning service, *roska* braided as the traditional Sabbath bread, *challah*, is served. *Roska* is shaped into ring-shaped loaves representing eternity and auguring abundance for Rosh Hashanah, and for the meal to break the Fast where it is dipped into olive oil.

A version of this ancient bread, called *roska reynado*, is prepared for a bride's shower, which typically takes place on the Friday prior to the wedding. For this celebration an opulent stuffing of homemade marzipan or the *travado* filling is rolled into the dough, which is then shaped into a ring or spiral.

For casual fare, the *roska* is shaped into small coffee rolls, *roskitas* or *panizikos*. The baked *roskitas* are delicious warmed through and served for breakfast or teas accompanied with olives, sliced ripe tomatoes and cubes of feta cheese. My family loves to eat them piping hot and fresh from the oven with a fruit preserve.

For the starter:

4 tsp active dried yeast (rapid-rise)
1½ cups warm water (about 55°C/110°F)
1 tbsp caster (superfine) sugar

For the dough:

5 large eggs, at room temperature
1½ cups caster sugar
¾ cup vegetable oil, plus extra for coating the bowl and brushing
1 tsp orange blossom water
2 cups warm water
11-12 cups unbleached plain (all-purpose) flour, sifted with 1 tsp salt, plus extra flour for kneading

For the egg wash:

2 egg yolks mixed with 1 tsp milk

For the topping:

½ cup sesame seeds placed in a flat dish
¼ cup whole blanched almonds (optional)

Prepare the starter: Dissolve the yeast and sugar in the warm water in a small bowl. Stir, cover with plastic wrap and let stand for 5-10 minutes until frothy.

Prepare the dough: Using a heavy-duty electric mixer with a whisk attachment, beat the eggs with the sugar until pale and creamy. Slowly add the oil, the yeast starter, orange blossom water and 2 cups warm water and blend.

Remove the whisk attachment and fit the mixer with a dough hook. Turn the mixer on medium speed. Mix in 1½ cups of flour. Then gradually add flour, 1 cup at a time, and knead until the dough holds together and no longer sticks to the sides of the bowl. Place on a lightly floured surface and knead until smooth and elastic.

Fit the mixer with a mincing attachment. Break off a handful of dough at a time and dust with flour. Roll into logs and put each piece through the mincer set over a lightly oiled large bowl*. Cover with a loose piece of oiled plastic wrap and then with a tea towel. Let rise in a warm draught-free place for about 3 hours or until it doubles in bulk and is light and spongy. (The time depends on the temperature of the room).

Transfer the dough onto a lightly floured work surface and punch down again. Knead briefly to get rid of any air pockets and divide into 3 portions.

Lightly brush 3 foil-lined baking trays with oil and dust with flour.

Shape the braided loaf:

- Divide one portion into 3 equal pieces and shape each piece into a ball.
- Roll each ball with your hands into a rope 56cm (22in) long that tapers slightly at each end.
- Working with 3 ropes at a time, fan out the strands evenly on a work surface, then pinch them firmly together at the top end.
- Braid by bringing the alternate outer ropes between the remaining two and repeat until the end of the ropes are reached.
- Finally gently pinch the ends together to seal firmly.

Repeat with remaining two portions of dough making three loaves.

Alternatively: The three portions can be shaped into ring-shaped loaves or coiled into spirals.

Shape the rolls: Divide the dough into 40 x 100g (3½oz) portions. Shape them into equal balls or roll the dough into 20cm (8in) ropes and tie each rope into a loose knot.

Brush the tops of the bread or rolls with the egg wash, ensuring the tops and sides are well coated. Brush right into the crevices. Wet your fingers in water and then tap into the sesame seeds. Press lightly onto the tops of the bread or rolls to give a generous coating of seeds and decorate with a few blanched almonds (if using). Transfer the shaped loaves or rolls onto the baking trays and place the rolls 5cm (2in) apart. Loosely cover with a piece of oiled plastic wrap and let rise again in a warm draught-free place for 45 minutes or until doubled in bulk. Brush generously once more with egg wash to ensure a lacquer-like crust.

Preheat the oven to 180°C (350°F).

Bake for 40 minutes for the bread and 20-25 minutes for the rolls or until the tops are golden brown and shiny and they sound hollow when tapped on the bottom. Transfer to a wire rack. Serve warm or at room temperature. Makes 3 loaves or 40 rolls.

Stella's Hints:

- To make this quantity you will require a large, heavy-duty, free-standing mixer as a standard-size kitchen aid is too small. If you do not have one, beat the eggs with a hand-held electric beater and knead the dough by hand.
- *The mincing process makes a lighter dough but can be omitted.
- For the first rise, the dough may also rise in an oven that has been warmed to 150°C (300°F) and then turned off.
- I like to use Better for Bread flour when I am in the U.S.
- *Roska* and *roskitas* keep for 3 days in an airtight container. To serve, warm through.
- To freeze whole baked bread or rolls: Wrap a loaf or a small batch of rolls in heavy-duty foil and freeze for up to 1 month. Thaw at room temperature. Preheat the oven to 180°C (350°F) and reheat in the foil until warmed through.