

WayBread of the West

WAYBREAD OF THE WEST

What follows is a recipe for a crispy, tasty, and filling shortbread-ish waybread. It is thought to be similar to the elfish “Lembas” described in J.R.R. Tolkein’s writings, especially his “Lord of the Rings” trilogy.

My methods may be primitive, but if you, like me, lack training, have all the ingredients, access to a kitchen, and no adult supervision, my account may be a practical, helpful, and effective guide.

Ingredients:

1 ½	cups	Flour
1 ½	cups	Almond meal/flour
1 ½	cups	Granulated blanched / slivered almonds
1	cup	Sugar
½	tsp.	salt
1	tsp.	Ground cinnamon
½	tsp.	Ground nutmeg
½	tsp.	Ground cardamom
½	tsp.	Almond extract
1	cup	Salted, real, butter, slightly softened (2 cubes)
2	Tbsp.	Water.

Set oven to 400 degrees. (I used an oven thermometer.)

Bake for about 10 minutes – until edges are browned but not burned – check on them.

Use un-greased baking sheets. They don’t stick.

Makes about 24 to 30 pieces per batch.

Notes:

1. I try to use clean, organic products.
2. I found the almond meal/flour at the health food section of my local grocery store.
3. Blanched (slivered) almonds have less moisture and no skins. That’s better.
4. Any granulated (dry!) sugar will work fine. I like the raw, brown cane stuff.
5. I used sea-salt from a grinder, but good old table salt would do fine I’m sure.
6. I used pre-ground cinnamon and nutmeg, but ground my own cardamom seeds.
7. Resist the urge to add more water, or other liquid! Batter will be quite stiff.
8. If they are under-baked they’ll be doughy. Don’t burn them, but cook them crisp.

Man-Cooking methods:

Ok, a quick intro. I like working with wood. I like working with clay. I like doing things in practical ways. I like tools, but I prefer using as few as possible. I don't risk cooking stuff very often, but when I do, I try to leave the kitchen very clean so that I don't disappoint anyone who actually uses it on a regular basis and *does* know what they are doing in there. I'd expect nothing less of someone using my shop space.

I think of cooking as processes of mechanical manipulations and magical chemistry. My first challenge, of course, was to try to understand the magical part and so I asked my lovely wife a few casual questions. The basics really – sort of along the lines of:

- “Since I'm not an elf, and don't have a secret recipe, how do I make Lembas?”
- “Start with shortbread? Ok, but how is shortbread different from longbread?”
- “What can I mess with, without messing up the final product?”
- “Since I can't smell things very well, will you tell me if you smell a kitchen fire?”
- “Will you be willing to taste-test what I make if I promise to eat some first?”
- It's always a good idea to have some sort of “flight plan” don't you agree?

So, with sufficient training on magic and with confidence in basic construction, I figured I'd get started. I'd mixed sawdust, clay, plaster, and cement with primitive tools before, so I applied myself and my skills without fear. How hard could it be? Here is what I did:

1. I granulated the slivered almonds a half-cup at a time, combined with a half cup of the regular flour. I used a food processor thingy I found in the kitchen to blast the mix in short bursts because some of my research said it was the way to get the grind even without turning the almonds into paste. (I could have used the electric coffee grinder but it doesn't hold very much.) The almonds were reduced in size and texture to that of course sugar. I dumped the flour-almond combo into the biggest bowl I could find.
2. I measured out the almond meal/flour and dumped that into the bowl.
3. I measured out the sugar and dumped that in.
4. I ground the sea salt into my palm, checked it with a measuring spoon and sprinkled that into the bowl.
5. I measured out the cinnamon and nutmeg and dumped them in.
6. I broke open the cardamom seed pods and used my mortar and pestle to grind them up. I checked the amount with a measuring spoon and dumped that in. Later I found pre-ground cardamom at a different store and would have used that if I'd found it before I found the seed pods. (But I did like grinding them with a primitive stone tool.)
7. I used one of those multi-bladed pastry knives to mix all the stuff in the bowl.
8. I dribbled in the measured almond extract and mixed it in till it disappeared.
9. I used the pastry knife to cut in the butter until it was evenly distributed.
10. I dribbled in the measured water and kept working it over with the pastry knife until the mix mostly hung together and filled the pastry knife up to my knuckles no matter what part of the mix I worked on.

11. Next, I smooshed it with my hands, like mixing clay, meatloaf, or half-dried mud.
12. Ok, once the dough almost all hung together, I kneaded it like reluctant bread dough, folding it over and crushing it with the heel of my hand until it got just a bit stretchy and stayed together in one big blob.
13. Next I “wedged” it like you do when you are slam-mixing clay for use on a throwing wheel. I did this until the stiff dough all stuck together and picked up all the dough shrapnel that was in the big bowl. (Fortunately that was just before my wife became alarmed at the pounding noise in her kitchen!)
14. I then used a rolling pin to roll out the dough on a floured board to about a 1/4 to 3/8 inch thick (6 to 8 mm) and used my biscuit cutter to cut the shapes. I made my own biscuit cutter because I wanted square waybreads and didn't like the way the cut-with-a-knife ones looked in my earlier attempts. I used a hobby-shop piece of thin, polished stainless steel and hammered in a couple of soft metal rivets to bind it. (The Dunedian surely must have used these.)
15. I spaced them about 1/2 inch (12mm) apart because they spread out a bit when cooked.
16. Cooking thin crispy things at 400 degrees leaves only a small margin of error between under-done, perfect, and charred camp food. **Check them carefully!** When the edges are browned and there is a bit of light brown on the tops, pull them and let them cool on the pan for a minute before transferring them to a cooling rack. They quickly cool enough to go from breakable to strong.
17. Eat the mistakes, or let the small hobbits help with that once cooled down. (Good on ice cream too!)

These freeze well. I have not yet tested their non-refrigerated longevity, but I suspect it will be along the lines of shortbread.

