

# BRAIDED *Cardamom Bread*

by Hannah Lieberman



I've been baking bread on my own since I was eleven or twelve, and while my skills and latest recipes may have changed, my approach remains identical. The process of kneading, shaping, and braiding bread dough lends itself to mindfulness; to intricate patterns, and improvised creative splashes of caraway or cardamom; and once the oven is left cooling, a shared table. I learned to cook from my father, but baking was a science I had to teach myself – very different at first glance from the forgiving atmosphere of his laissez-faire measurements, and obstinate refusal to write down or follow a recipe. But this also meant that baking was a world of my own – a land left unconquered in our kitchen, and in which, for lack of experience, my dad could hardly give me any authoritative tips. I picked up my mixer and baking sheets, and got to learning.

The recipe I'm sharing with you today comes with a story, which begins in the last few days of summer 2019. Towards the end of August, two events raced towards me: the first day of my freshman year of high school, and my birthday, which as they often do, conveniently shared a square on the calendar. I'm certain I was more excited to begin school than for my own birthday – the transition was only across campus from middle school, and I made the move with a group of friends I've grown up with, to join my older sister in high school. Even if I wasn't particularly nervous about the first day of school, I was definitely feeling a lot of big feelings, and my fallback for processing is to return to my kitchen. In this case, I decided to make something that attempted to capture all of the love and excitement I was feeling towards this community. Of course this kind of abundance could only be teared and passed around in the form of enriched and leavened gluten.

The night before the first day of school I stayed up far past my bedtime, and as the rest of my family slept, I mixed, proofed, shaped and braided a colossal cardamom bread centerpiece to bring with me the next morning. The finished product, gleaming with egg wash, was the size of a truck tire. And this is how I came to walk into my first day of high school, balancing a ten pound loaf of bread on a tray in my arms. The whole high school was only around 65 students, and a dozen teachers/faculty, and as I traded smiles and passed around pads of butter to each one of them in turn, I couldn't have been happier. Feeding people is a deep act of love, and looking back I am so proud of my freshman self for opening this next phase of life by breaking bread with my community, and making my first steps ones of patient, creative, generous gratitude. Blowing out candles on a cake later that night could hardly live up to the wishes for my future woven into that bread, and fed to my community.

Every time I make this bread, it is a little different, because after all my first education was in sprinkling and smelling and judging by eye. And yet consistently I make far too much; I make more bread than my family could possibly consume before it goes stale. I think it is my body remembering and perhaps reminding that this food is made to share. Certainly in my life, I will always err on the side of abundance, of the sort that sends you to school or to work or to a neighbor's door with something warm and unpredicted. It is both how I know myself, and how I go out to meet others.





# *instructions:*

*\*Makes 4 loaves, or one mega-loaf\**

1) In a bowl, dissolve yeast in warm water. Add warm milk, sugar, butter, 2 eggs, cardamom, salt and 6 cups flour; beat until smooth. Stir in enough remaining flour to form a soft dough.

2) Turn onto a floured surface; knead until smooth and elastic, about 6-8 minutes. Place in a greased bowl, turning once to grease top. Cover and let rise in a warm place until doubled, about 1-1/4 hours.

3) Punch dough down; cover and let rest for 10 minutes. Divide into fourths.\*\* Divide each portion into thirds; shape each into a 12-in. rope. Place three ropes on a greased baking sheet and braid; pinch ends to seal and tuck under. Repeat with remaining dough. Cover and let rise in a warm place until nearly doubled, about 45 minutes.

4) Preheat oven to 375°. Beat remaining egg; brush over loaves. Sprinkle with sugar. Bake until golden brown, 20-25 minutes. Remove from pans to wire racks.

*\*\*for alternative braiding instructions, including the mega-roll pictured, see following page*



- **2 packages (1/4 ounce each) active dry yeast**
- **1/2 cup warm water (110° to 115°)**
- **1-1/2 cups warm whole milk (110° to 115°)**
- **1-1/2 cups sugar**
- **1/2 cup butter, softened**
- **3 large eggs, room temperature**
- **2 teaspoons ground cardamom**
- **1/2 teaspoon salt**
- **9 to 10 cups all-purpose flour**
- **Additional sugar**
- **Optional: caraway, or other aromatic spices, and poppy seeds/sesame for topping**





# *shaping*

## **Mega-Loaf**

1) Divide dough into fourths, and roll out three of the portions until they have roughly an inch in diameter, with slightly tapered ends.

2) Attach the three strands simply by pressing them together, and weave them into a classic braid.

3) Roll out remaining quarter of dough, and swirl it into the center roll shape, placing it on a prepared FULL SIZE baking sheet.

4) Wrap the dough braid around the center swirl, beginning from a point on its side, and lopping outwards, then tucking in the end of the braid underneath.

5) Cover and let rise until doubled (slightly longer than the original recipe calls for).

6) Bake until golden brown, and lighter in weight, around 45 mins, or longer if needed. If the dough isn't ready but crust is in danger of burning, cover it with a piece of aluminum foil and continue baking.





## Challah Braiding Styles

I like to experiment with different braiding styles, pulling from traditional Jewish challah patterns, as well as French boulangerie. As you can begin to see in the images to your left, based off of three, and up to eight or nine strand braids, with added decorative scoring techniques, your decorative options are many. You can make a simple three strand braid and pull it into a circle. You can make a more complicated four strand braid, and add another small twist on top. One of my favorites is based on the French 'pain d'epi,' which is a baguette cut to look like a stalk of wheat. By cutting down a single strand at a 45 degree angle inch or so with a pair of kitchen scissors, then separating the cut segments to alternating sides, you come out with a beautiful wheat stalk for laying over the main body of dough. For more in-depth instructions, I highly recommend visiting Uri Scheft's challah recipe (<https://korenainthekitchen.com/2017/05/31/uri-schefts-challah/>), and/or exploring what the internet has to offer for 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 strand braids!



Another traditional Jewish way of finishing a loaf of bread is to brush the surface with egg wash, and then sprinkle the seeds of your choice (poppy or sesame most typically), which stick to the egg and are baked on.



image via Uri Scheft