

Thirded Bread

History:

This was a “make do” bread for Pilgrims and their descendants in the 17th and 18th centuries, whenever they didn’t have enough (or couldn’t afford) wheat flour. It was made from one third wheat (white or whole/Graham), one third Indian meal (corn/maize), and one third rye. It was meant to stretch the wheat as far as it could go, at a time when cornmeal and rye (also called Boston Brown Bread, and often mixed with molasses) was considered commonplace and not as prestigious. This is not bread a colonist would have ever made for guests. In 1792, Parisian bakers tried to re-brand it as “Bread of Equality,” which was a combination of brown, white, and rye grains, in order to popularize cheap foods and to symbolize that being the common man was something to be celebrated, not degraded. During the Victorian era, when the idea of a “traditional Thanksgiving” began taking hold, this “bread of the olden days,” as it was then-called, became a new fad, and thus rye grains managed to stay with us, despite that early colonists once referred to them as “the poorer cousins” to wheat flour. Early Thirded Bread was steamed instead of baked, as many early homes had thatched roofs and no ovens; steaming was an effective way to cook bread without an oven (*American Cooking: New England* by Jonathan Norton Leonard). It has also been suggested by some historians that steaming was a way for Puritans to get around their rule of not cooking on the Sabbath, and thus a new ritual was born. This bread was often served as an entire Sunday meal, alongside baked beans if the bread contained molasses, which complemented the beans. There are many recipes for the bread, dating back to the Old World, but for history-lovers’ sake, today’s recipe comes from no less than Mary Todd Lincoln’s own personal cookbook.



Ingredients as Mary Todd Lincoln wrote them*:

- 1 cup white flour (St. Louis).
- 1 cup rye flour, or sifted rye meal.
- 1 cup yellow corn meal.
- 1 teaspoonful salt.
- 3 tablespoonfuls sugar.
- ½ cup yeast.

Mary Todd Lincoln's Directions:

Mix with milk (scalded and cooled) till thick enough to be shaped. Let it rise until it cracks open. Put it into a brickloaf pan, and when well risen bake it one hour.

Leah's Modifications:

If you are not familiar with scalded milk, it is milk that is brought almost to a boil, and then left to cool slightly. Scalded milk makes yeast breads lighter, and lighter dough will rise faster, cutting your waiting time down considerably. If you are not familiar with letting bread dough rise, it can be a lengthy process, but here are some tips to speed it up: Use the scalded milk idea instead of water, as scalded milk lightens the dough. Warm up your kitchen. A lean, moist dough can rise in a warm kitchen in 45 minutes, but yeast is very temperature-sensitive; even a degree or two can make the process much longer. Moisten your dough, not only with the milk, but with a bit of oil on the top and bottom of it. Moist dough rises faster, but more than this: oil keeps your dough from drying out as it rises, which will keep your bread lighter, fluffier, and moister in the end. Covering your dough bowl with a damp cloth, or creating steam around the bowl by placing it next to hot, steaming water, will also decrease your rising time. If you've never risen dough before, it can be tricky to know when it's done, because it's more by sight and feel than by the timer. When it is done, it will look soft and bloated, and when you touch the dough, it will be a soft texture, and your finger will leave an indentation. If it is not done, the dough will slowly spring back from the indentation. You want the end result to be puffy, as more gas inside it will mean lighter, fluffier bread, and it will be double or more its original volume. (And some people prefer to let their bread rise very slowly, sometimes putting it in cool places to slow the process, because this brings out the acidic flavor of the yeast, perfect for breads like sourdoughs.) Because ovens have changed tremendously since Mrs. Lincoln's day, we recommend a temperature of 375° to 400° F, and to leave the pan in for 30 to 50 minutes, checking it every 10 minutes at the half-hour mark, until a cake- or bread-tester goes all the way through it without any stickiness. The crust should be dry, very firm, and a dark brown color with darker spots here and there. If you have an instant-read thermometer, most bread is done when the internal temperature reaches 190° F. If you're in doubt, it's better to cook the loaf a little longer than to undercook it. Let the bread cool completely before you remove it from the pan or cut into it. For added sweetness, add a dab of molasses to taste.

**We left "St. Louis" in the ingredients, for posterity, although we can find no indication of what that actually means.
Adapted from Mrs. Lincoln's Boston Cook Book by Mary Todd Lincoln, and modified by Leah Angstman.*