Alan Coxon's Flower Pot Bread

The thought of making home-made bread can be a daunting one but making a lovely white fluffy loaf in your own kitchen isn't actually that hard if you're prepared to put in the work! In my recipe I've chosen to bake the bread in plant pots. The idea comes from a summer party I was preparing for. I wanted something rustic and simple, in keeping with an outdoor theme. It was certainly a point of conversation and the bread of course, turned out 'blooming marvellous'!

The recipe

You'll need 2 10 x 6" diameter flower pots or 1 900g/2lb loaf tin.

Ingredients
600g (1lb 4oz) strong white flour
11g (3/8 oz) salt
15g (1/2 oz) dried milk powder
15g (1/2oz) sugar
15g (1/2oz) butter
26g (7/8ths oz) fresh yeast
330ml (11 1/2 oz) water

Optional additions - pick and choose
60g (2oz) olives, chopped and stoned
60g (2oz) Pumpkin seeds
60g (2oz) walnuts
2 tblsp mixed herbs
60g (2oz) cheese
60g (2oz) pecan nuts
60g (2oz) poppy seeds

Making Bread
Prepare your container first. If you do use flower pots use brand new terracotta ones and wash them thoroughly. Pots or loaf tin should be greased with butter.

Sieve the flour into a warm bowl with salt and milk powder (a little twist which adds a bit of sweetness to the bread as well as helping to make it light in colour). Crumble up your yeast with a little warm milk and mix it together with a little warm water, sugar and flour to feed it. Cream together and keep in a warm place for 15-20 minutes. When the yeast mix is ready add the remaining water and sugar. Meanwhile, rub some butter into the flour mix, the colder it is the easier it is to rub in, and add a little bit of wheat germ. Add the fermented yeast and start to stir them together gradually adding some warm water. Knead until smooth.

Cooking bread
Cover with a tea towel and store in a warm place to ferment for 45 minutes at 37/40° Centigrade - body temperature - until it has trebled in size. Once risen, this is the time to mix in the dry optional additions of your choice. Knead again and shape into an oval. Criss-cross 2 strips of strong baking foil into the pots, allowing a 2 inch overhang over the edge. This will make it easier to remove when the bread is cooked. Divide the dough evenly between the two flower pots or place all the dough in the loaf tin. Leave to prove until doubled in size and then bake in a pre-heated oven at 220°C/450°F/ Gas mark 8 for 25 to 35 mins depending on its size.

Alan's tips
I find fresh yeast is the best and you can get it from most delicatessens. It will last about two weeks if you leave it covered in the fridge. And if you ensure that it is well wrapped and protected yeast can also be frozen. For a crustier loaf, place a bowl or tray containing water in the oven.

Kneading
Place the dough on the table and using the palm and base of the hand, push the dough down and away from you. Lift the edge of the dough and bring the dough back towards you, repeat the process: push down away from you, lift up and towards you. You'll get into a rhythm, I even consider it a way to get in that all important exercise, without having to leave the warmth and comfort of my own kitchen! About 3-4 minutes kneading will be plenty. When it's ready the dough should feel smooth and silky to the touch, and not sticky. Give your earlobes a squeeze and that's how it should feel!

The science

The right flour
Bread flour is really strong - which means it contains lots of protein. The proteins form gluten, which is what gives the dough its elasticity and holds in place the air bubbles that make your bread nice and light. Glutens are perfect for bread-making: they are elastic enough to stretch, to allow the air bubbles to expand, but resilient enough to hold them in place too, not just allowing them to rise and escape.

Yeast's alive!
Yeast is a micro-organism. It's alive and needs to be fed and kept warm, which is why Alan adds sugar and flour to feed it, and why he warms the water up. The yeast then gets going, and produces carbon dioxide which is what makes the bread rise.

Nutrition
Wheat germ is what contains most of the nutritional value of wheat, the vitamin B and the iron. Wheat has three parts: the shoot, which is the wheat germ; the stored energy for the shoot, the starch, which is the white flour; and the outer protective husk, which is the bran.

Kneading
Kneading might be hard work but it is vital for the gluten to work properly. The gluten starts off as tiny spring-shaped molecules that link together and form a big network, which is a bit like a tangled-up ball of wool. When you knead the dough these springs get stretched out and lined up with each other, making the dough more elastic.

Two Risings
The first rising of the bread is for the gluten development. The expanding air bubbles stretch out the springy gluten molecules even more. When you knock back the dough you relax all the stretched gluten. The second kneading re-distributes all the ingredients, so the yeast gets a fresh food supply. The second time you leave the dough to rise, it is to give the yeast a chance to produce evenly-spaced air bubbles that will make the bread light and fluffy. With only one rising, the gluten wouldn’t be as well developed, the ingredients wouldn’t be as well distributed, and you’d end up with holes of many different sizes, and a less even texture.