

Cheese and Za'atar Oval Loaf

For this loaf, I spread out the dough, sprinkle it with the cheese and za'atar, roll it up again and proof and bake it in a loaf pan. The same method can be used to create a sweet version, and you can convert this to your very own version at will. Za'atar is a Middle Eastern spice and herb blend, made with thyme, sumac, sesame seeds and salt, producing a savory flavor that I love. I have used cheese and za'atar in my loaf; feel free to use a spice or herb blend of your choice.

50 g (¼ cup) active starter

350 g (1½ cups) water

500 g (4 cups) strong white bread flour, plus more for dusting

50 g (¼ cup) sunflower seeds

7 g (1 tsp) salt, or to taste

Rice flour, for dusting

Mix-In

150 g (1¼ cups) grated hard cheese, such as strong Cheddar, aged Gouda or Comté

28 g (4 tbsp) za'atar, or to taste

PREP: Feed your starter to generate the 50 grams (¼ cup) of active starter needed for the recipe. Prepare an 11-inch (28-cm)-long oval banneton with rice flour and set aside a baking pan, at least 12 inches (30 cm) long with a lid, plus parchment paper.

Makes 1 standard loaf

Step 1: In the early evening, in a large mixing bowl, roughly mix together all the ingredients, except the rice flour, cheese and za'atar, until you have a shaggy rough dough. Cover the bowl with a clean shower cap or your choice of cover and leave the bowl on the counter for 1 hour.

Step 2: After an hour or so, perform the first set of pulls and folds until the dough feels less sticky and comes together into a soft seed studded ball. Cover the bowl again and leave it on your counter.

Step 3: Over the next few hours, do three more sets of pulls and folds on the dough, covering the dough after each set. Perform the final set before going to bed.

Step 4: Leave the covered bowl on the counter overnight, typically 8 to 10 hours, at 64 to 68°F (18 to 20°C).

Step 5: In the morning, the dough will have grown to double in size, with a smooth surface. Sprinkle flour over your kitchen counter and lay the pan liner open alongside the dough. Using a bowl scraper or your hands, gently ease the risen dough from the bowl onto the counter.

Use your fingertips to start stretching and pushing out the dough, until it becomes an 8 x 15¾-inch (20 x 40-cm) rectangle with an even thickness all over. The dough will want to pull back as you stretch it; continue to pull it gently, being careful not to make holes in the dough.

Spread the cheese spread evenly over the stretchy dough and sprinkle with the za'atar. Roll up the dough from one of the shorter edges toward the other to make an even roll of dough. Lift the sausage of dough and place it, smooth side down, in your prepared banneton, sprinkling extra rice flour down the sides and across the top, cover with the same shower cap and place in the fridge for at least 3 hours, maximum 24 hours.



Step 6: When you are ready to bake, decide whether you would like to bake in a preheated oven or from a cold start. If preheating, set the oven to 425°F (220°C) convection or 450°F (230°C) conventional.

Remove the cover from the banneton, then place the paper over the top of the banneton and the pan upside down over the top of them both. With one hand under the banneton and one on the pan, turn it all over together to turn the dough out of the banneton and into the pan. Score the dough in a single line down the middle.

If you preheated the oven, put the lid on and bake for 50 minutes. If using a cold start, place the covered pan of dough in the oven, set the temperature as above and set a timer for 55 minutes.

After the baking time for either option, remove the covered pan from the oven. Open the lid to check the loaf. Baking in a lidded pan produces a golden loaf. When you take the lid off, if you feel that your loaf is looking pale, place it back in the hot oven, in its pan, minus the lid, for 5 to 10 minutes to brown the loaf to the color of your choice.

Step 7: Once baked, carefully remove the loaf from the pan, saving the parchment paper for next time, and allow the baked loaf to cool on a wire rack for at least an hour before slicing.