

IRISH SODA BREAD

(Baking with Julia)

4 cups unbleached all-purpose flour
1 tsp. baking soda
1 1/2 tsp. salt
2 cups buttermilk (or 2 cups milk mixed with 2 Tbsp. vinegar)

1 cup raisins, currants, or diced dried fruits (optional)

Preheat oven to 375F. Grease an 8-inch glass pie plate or a baking sheet.

Put the flour, baking soda, and salt in a medium bowl and stir with a fork to blend. Add the buttermilk and stir vigorously until the dough comes together. Add dried fruit if using.

Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured work surface and knead gently for a minute. The dough will be soft and malleable, but, tantalizing as it is, it should not be overworked. Pat the dough into a disk about 6 inches across, slash an X across the top, cutting it about 1/2-inch deep, and place the dough in the greased pan or on the baking sheet.

Bake for about 50 minutes, or until the slash has widened and the bread is golden brown. Transfer to a rack to cool completely, then slice or wrap in a moist towel until ready to serve. Allow the bread to cool completely before serving.

The bread can be kept for a few hours, wrapped and at room temperature, but by the end of the day, with just the wee bit of fat that's in the buttermilk, it will turn hard as the Blarney Stone.

Makes 1 loaf.

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