“Pane Francese” Recipe
by Jack Deatherage, jr
(based on recipe from : "BAKING ARTISAN BREAD" by Ciril Hitz)

Biga (pre-fermentation used in Italian baking)
Ingredients

- all-purpose flour (1 cup + 1 1/2 tbs)
- Water (3/8 cups)
- active dry yeast (ADY) (1/2 tsp) or small pinch of fresh

Biga Preparation

- In a medium bowl mix ingredients, cover with plastic, leave at room temperature for 2 hours. Place in the fridge for a few hours (overnight is best).

Dough
Ingredients

- Biga
- Water (2/3 cup)
- salt (1 tsp)
- all-purpose flour (1 1/2 cups)

Preparation

1. In a larger bowl- tear biga into about ten pieces then add water, salt and squeeze by hand into a batter (have a plastic scraper handy- this is messy).

2. Add all-purpose flour

3. Mix by hand until all the flour is brought into the dough. Scrape hand clean. Cover the bowl with plastic and let rest for 30 minutes.

4. Remove plastic cover. Wet one hand with cold water and use that hand to squeeze the dough. Fold it over on itself and squeeze a few more times. Fold it over itself and cover with plastic and let rest for 45 minutes.

5. Remove cover. Wet hand again and scoop dough loose from the bowl. Holding one edge of the dough let it stretch under its own weight and slap the opposite end down in the bowl and fold the end you’re holding over the end in the bowl. Turn the bowl a quarter turn, scoop the dough up again letting it stretch a bit before slapping it back into the bowl and folding it over on itself again. Cover the bowl and let rest for 45 minutes. Then repeat the stretch and fold. (At this point the dough can be sprayed with cooking spray, covered with plastic and stored in the fridge until needed.)

6. If baking the same day the dough is made, then give the dough about 1 hour to ferment. Then dust the work area with a little bit of flour and scoop the dough onto the flour. It is better to use a bench knife, or anything else that would cut the dough into 4 pieces rather than tearing it.
7. I'm not much for shaping breads so I just flatten the pieces and place them on parchment (baking) paper. A greased (with vegetable shortening) baking pan would probably work as well, but paper makes cleanup so much easier.

8. Dust the rolls lightly with flour, or spritz with cooking spray and cover loosely with plastic wrap. Let rest for 45 minutes.

9. Place an oven rack in the middle setting. Set the oven temperature at 480 F and let it preheat 20 minutes.

10. Slide the pan into the oven and bake for 10 minutes-with steam if possible. (Steaming method in "tips" below.) Rotate the pan and bake for another 5 minutes.

11. Picking up a roll with a dry towel or oven mitt, test for doneness by tapping the roll on its bottom. It should sound hollow.

12. Cool on a wire rack, or use still warm from the oven. (Flavor builds as the bread cools.)

Tips

- I keep a cast iron skillet under the middle rack so I can create steam, but spritzing the dough just before it goes into the oven should work as well.

- Because this is a lean bread (no additives such as eggs, oils, milk) it dries quickly and becomes hard even if stored tightly wrapped in plastic. It can be softened if microwaved for 15 seconds or so.