

Bake Cardamom Vatrushki for a Happy Family

Pillowy circles of dough filled with sweet farmer's cheese.

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Want to see a grim and dour Russian soften and become dewy-eyed? Serve him (or her) a vatrushka and watch the magic happen. These soft buns, filled with sweet, creamy tvorog instantly transport the most cynical Slav back to a halcyon era, half obscured by the mists of time, where a kindly babushka (or kindergarten teacher) doles out these addictive pastries as part of a lazy breakfast or midmorning snack.

I know this because for some months now, I've been on a mission to create the perfect vatrushka, an Augean Stable of a job that has resulted in a weekly output of at least a dozen vatrushki. And my long-suffering family has not complained once. Quite the opposite, they have encouraged me to continue on my quixotic search for vatrushka perfection.

Vatrushka intrigued me for several reasons. The latent folklorist in me sees the significance of their round shape, which, like blini and oladi, are potent Slavic symbols of both the sun and the cycle of life. Vatrushki also have associations with fire: “vatrá” in many Slavic languages is a root that connotes “hearth” or “fireplace,” the equivalent to the all-important Russian “pechka” or stove.

The emergent homesteader in me always needs fresh ways to use up all the ricotta and tvorog I started making during lockdown, that has now become routine. And I have my own nostalgic associations with vatrushki, which were always front and center at our regimented Intourist breakfasts when I was a tour guide in the former Soviet Union. Whether we were in Samarkand or Suzdal, a large platter of vatrushki always dominated the long communal table. After trying and enjoying them, many of my American guests concluded that these were a Russian precursor of the popular American Cheese Danish. (They aren’t — Viennese bakers invented Cheese Danish during a bakers’ strike in Denmark and brought them to America around 1840 — but the idea of filling a dough circle with creamy cheese is close enough.)

It was the dough that kept me hard at work in the Test Kitchen for months. Early on, I cracked the filling: enhancing it with a small infusion of crushed cardamom seeds, an addition, which solved what I’ve always felt was the weakness in vatrushka: a flatness of flavor. But the dough continued to frustrate me: each batch brought me slightly closer to my own imagined ideal: a soft, airy, springy dough, shimmering golden from a generous egg yolk wash. Not too sweet, though, because it is the filling that carries the sweetness.

I deployed my entire arsenal of dough tricks; nothing worked. Baking is a science, I reminded myself as checked amounts that ran from 500 to 800 grams for the same amount of wet ingredients. I felt that uneasy sense Russia often engenders in me that everyone else knows what’s going on and they are deliberately keeping it from me.

My attempts to pinpoint one amount of flour were all failures until I finally recognized that each batch of vatrushka dough simply absorbs the right amount of flour that batch needs to magically morph from sticky, hard-to-handle into a pliant and elastic miracle that effortlessly doubles in size. And after that, I felt sanguine about the extra 200 grams it seemed necessary to have to the ready.

Is there a life lesson here? Perhaps. Maybe we need to absorb the right amount of something — stress, joy, knowledge, work, play, fresh air, take your pick — before we become the thing we are destined to be. And if that’s the case, it is a good thing I’ve cracked this vatrushka dough, because my hips seem to be destined to become large blobs of — admittedly perfect — dough.

The recipe below will guide you through making the vatrushka dough and incorporating the flour bit by bit until you achieve the ideal consistency; don’t skip the time-consuming additions of small amounts; even a lone tablespoon can tip the dough over the edge. The addition of mayonnaise is a trick I gleaned from the wonderful Ukrainian-born Seattle-based food blogger Natalya from Momdish.com. Regular readers of this column will know that I have a love-hate relationship with mayonnaise, but in this case, it is spot on the right ingredient to pull the whole dough together and keep it soft and pliant.

A note on fillings: classic vatrushki are made with a version of the tvorog filling you will find

in the recipe below, but you could also fill them with jam, chocolate, or a combination tvorog and dried fruits. My cardamom infusion will delight those who enjoy that spice, but you could also use cinnamon or nutmeg to equal effect. Go with whatever makes you happy.

Ingredients

For the dough

- 1 package (7 grams) dry yeast
- 2 cups (460 ml) milk, warmed to 105°F
- 4 Tbsp (60 ml) sugar, divided
- 3 eggs and 2 egg yolks, divided
- 2 Tbsp mayonnaise
- 4 Tbsp vegetable oil
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 1/2 tsp nutmeg
- 1 1/3 lb (600 grams) all-purpose flour, plus more flour as needed
- 1/2 tsp of salt

For the filling

- 1/4 cup (60 ml) heavy cream
- 1 tsp cardamom seeds, crushed with a mortar and pestle
- 1 lb (500 grams) tvorog or farmer's cheese
- 1 egg
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 4 Tbsp sugar

Instructions

- Mix the dry yeast with 2 Tbsp of sugar together in a non-reactive bowl. Add the warmed milk and whisk gently to combine. Cover and put in a warm place with no drafts for 15-20 minutes until the mixture is foaming.
- Whisk together 3 eggs with the mayonnaise, oil, vanilla, nutmeg, salt and remaining sugar in the bowl of a standing mixer. Add in a cup of the flour and whisk until the mixture is smooth.
- Switch to the paddle attachment of your mixer or use a spatula for the next step. Add the proofed yeast and milk mixture to the dough and combine until incorporated.
- Switch to the dough hook of your standing mixer or knead the dough by hand. Add the flour in half cup increments. The dough will be sticky until it takes enough flour to become smoother and be more elastic. If the dough is still sticky, add more flour in smaller increments of 1-2 Tbsp at a time. This can be frustrating, but trust the process.
- When the dough pulls away from the hook, turn it out onto a floured surface and knead with your hands for a few moments; it will come together as you do, and form itself into a pliant, smooth ball of dough that does not stick to your fingers. Add small amounts of flour as needed.
- Oil a large bowl and shape the dough into a round circle, cover the bowl with plastic wrap and set it in a warm place to rise until it is doubled in size. This can take anywhere from

30 minutes in a proofing box to 60 minutes on your countertop.

- While the dough is rising, make the filling.
- Warm the cream to 100°F-105°F. Mix the crushed cardamom seeds into the cream and let it sit for 10 minutes. Combine the infused cream with the remaining ingredients in a food processor fitted with a steel blade. I find using a piping bag with a large tip useful for filling the vatrushki, but this is optional. Chill the mixture until you are ready to fill the vatrushki.
- When the dough has doubled in size, punch it down a few times, then turn it out onto a lightly floured surface. Divide the dough into three equal parts. Shape each part into a log, then cut each log into 4 pieces. Shape each piece into a round ball by pulling the edges to the bottom and pinching them. Set the balls, seam side down on a greased baking sheet and allow them to rise for 20-30 minutes.
- Preheat the oven to 350°F (180°C).
- Press the balls down with your hand, then dip the bottom of a glass or jar into flour and press it into the dough to create a well for the filling. The dough will contract, and you can use your fingers to help shape the vatrushka. Fill the well with the tvorog filling.
- Whisk the remaining egg yolks together and brush the sides of the vatrushki with the mixture.
- Bake the vatrushki for 20 minutes until they are golden and puffy.

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