



Crisp Pulled Flatbread

Roti Canai (Malaysia) or Roti Paratha (Singapore)

Buttery, crisp-edged, yet possessed of distinctive elasticity and chew, this Malaysian descendant of Paratha bread from southern India takes some time to prepare, but is a fun project that's well worth the commitment. It's invariably served with a meat or vegetable curry stew for dipping (pg. 290) although my nephews Hunter and Garrett like dipping into granulated sugar. This same dough can be stuffed with all sorts of fillings.

For simple versions an egg is cracked in center, then some add sliced chilies and onion, and a very common version is called Murtabak when a dry curry is used a hearty filling, making it a complete meal. When fillings like eggs or lentil puree are folded in, they are stretched as for plain roti, and then topped with a flavorful mixture, folded in from all four sides, and then transferred to griddle. The Thais use a similar dough to create a sweet snack with sliced bananas drizzled with condensed milk.

It takes some practice to master the stretching, pulling and folding that gives this bread its signature texture. Before you make this dish for the first time, try to watch the video at www.southeastasianflavors.com to see me make it for you! A standing mixer can be used to eliminate some of the work of hand-mixing the dough. Use the "hook" attachment for best results.

Timing Note: This dough needs at least six hours to rest but can be made the day before.

Make 8 pieces

- 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ lb. / 580 g.) All purpose flour
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. Kosher salt
- 1 tsp. Granulated sugar
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup Ghee, room temperature
(divided use) (pg 285)
- 1 lg. Egg, beaten
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup Whole milk
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup Water

1. Make the dough: Use your hands and a bowl or better yet a heavy-duty stand mixer with a paddle attachment: Combine flour, salt, sugar and $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the ghee. Rub together with fingertips (or run on low with dough hook) until mixture clumps. Add egg, milk, and water. Using one hand, mix until a cohesive dough forms. (Continue to mix with paddle until a smooth elastic dough is formed. Knead into a smooth, soft, elastic dough, about 8 to 10 minutes. It should be a bit sticky, but not wet. Cut into eight equal pieces, about 4 oz. each (113 g.). Form into smooth balls. Coat each ball with one teaspoon of ghee (yes... that much), slathering them well. Arrange in a single layer on a plate, cover lightly, and allow them to rest at room temperature for at least 6 hours (The dough can be made a day ahead up to this point, and kept in the refrigerator).



Murtabak is a stuffed version of this flatbread.





Step 3. Flatten dough into 6-inch circle and pull into paper-thin sheet.

2. Prepare your workspace: If the dough was prepared the day ahead, let come to a warm room temperature (Malaysia is tropical). So if your kitchen is cold, place the dough in warm area, or you can even microwave it for 10 second intervals. Warm dough is more elastic and easier to work with. Clean a 2-inch × 2-inch (.6m. × .6m.) surface, and coat it with a 12-inch circle (30 cm) of ghee (about 2 Tbsp). Coat hands liberally with ghee.

3. Stretch the dough into a sheet: Put 1 tsp. of ghee in center of the buttered work area; arrange one dough ball in the center. Press with your buttered palm to flatten dough into a 6-inch disk, less than 1/4 inch (0.6 cm.) thick, slightly thinner around edges. Choose a method, Traditional or Simplified, for stretching the dough:

TRADITIONAL DOUGH STRETCHING METHOD (Practice This Technique with Cloth Napkin First)

A. Place four fingers of your right hand underneath dough and your thumb on top, at the 5 o'clock position. Place four fingers of left hand on top of dough at 8 o'clock

B. Throw dough by moving right hand toward your left side, and then slapping it back onto table in one quick motion. Each time, as the dough sticks to the table, pull it back to stretch it further. The dough gets thinner as it's tossed and pulled. Repeat this until it become thin as possible without too many holes (a few are okay).

C. Systematically move your hands clockwise around dough perimeter each time you throw dough, allowing the disc to slowly rotate in your hands. This ensures an even stretch from all sides.

D. Make sure most of dough is paper thin by systematically moving around dough perimeter lifting thicker edges, pull outwards to thin and gently pressing against table to adhere.

MY SIMPLIFIED, FOOLPROOF DOUGH STRETCHING METHODS

A. In this method, the dough never leaves the table. Instead, you pull and stretch it from the center outwards. Make sure most of dough is paper thin by moving around dough perimeter with your fingertips and thumbs, lifting thicker edges, pulling outwards to thin, and gently pressing against table to adhere.

B. Systematically, slowly, work your way around the perimeter of dough circle pulling outwards to thin the dough. For the first few rounds, pull 3 to 4 inches (about 8 to 10 cm.) each time, making it thinner and thinner. As it gets thinner, it will be obvious where the thicker parts of the dough are. Focus on those areas. Keep going until you achieve a paper thin sheet. It should reach about 2 feet in diameter. Use the tips of your fingers to smooth those inevitably thicker parts paper thin.



This Singaporean hawker twists and pulls the dough pieces into a paper-thin sheet.



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SHAPE THE BREAD—A BIT MORE COMPLICATED:

Try to trap some air as you fold the dough into layers.

PARATHA STYLE (Able to Cook Immediately)

Using two hands, fold top quarter of dough over itself, almost reaching middle of sheet. Fold top edge over again to meet the top edge. Then repeat with other sides to create a square multi-layered square of dough about 6 to 8 inches (about 16 to 20 cm.) Each time you fold, try to capture some air in-between layers.

SIMPLE: ROTI CANAI STYLE

(Needs to Rest But Has More Layers)

Form sheets into layered ropes: Drizzle the paper-thin dough sheet with 1 teaspoon of ghee. Using two hands, fold top quarter of dough over itself, almost reaching middle of sheet. Fold top edge over again until you create a 1 to 2-inch (3 to 5 cm.) wide long rope. Each time you fold, try to capture some air in-between layers. (Alternate, simple method: loosely roll dough, jellyroll-style, into a 2-inch (5 cm.) wide rope.)

Beginning from one end, coil up the rolled rope into a loose pinwheel. Pull the outer end into center, and tuck it in. Flip the coil over. Each coiled disc should resemble a turban, and be filled with pockets of air. Repeat with all remaining dough balls. Let them rest at least 5 minutes for gluten (protein) to relax. This will make flattening them easier, and result in a more tender flatbread.



COOK THE BREADS:

Heat a griddle or large sauté pan over low flame. Firmly flatten and spread one disc of dough until it is 7 inches to 8 inches in diameter or (18 to 20 cm.) The dough will be elastic, and may pull back a little: That's okay. Drizzle the griddle with a little ghee. Add one bread to the pan, and cook slowly, turning once, 3 to 4 minutes per side, rotating occasionally to ensure even browning. Cook until each side is deep golden brown, even if that means more cooking time than you expect. The first bread is always a "tester," telling you whether to raise or lower the heat. Transfer the breads to a work surface, and then use a clapping motion (careful it will be hot), slapping the bread together between your hands to separate the layers. Repeat with remaining roti, cooking as many as will fit in the pan at one time.

Serve with curry (pg. 290), other flavorful heavily sauced dishes, or use it as a flatbread for a warm sandwich.

How and Why

1. When making the dough, have the ghee at room temperature, about 75°–80°F (23° to 26°C.) (it should be liquid). This ensures it mixes well into the dough. This will be important when forming the dough, since if it's too cold it becomes deceptively thick.
2. Resting dough after mixing allows you to stretch it as thin as possible. Kneading the dough forms layer of gluten protein, making the dough elastic. But the six-hour resting period allows the dough to relax again, enabling you to stretch it paper thin.
3. Pulling dough paper thin and drizzling with ghee creates multiple layers. The coating of ghee keeps the layers separate and traps moisture and air. This air expands during cooking, making the roti light and flaky.
4. Slap the cooked flatbreads to fully separate layers. The final stage of slapping the dough together separates the finer layers of dough that have adhered together (especially with round version above), increasing delicateness.



The Tekka Market in Singapore's Little India beholds a hawker stall that specializes in Roti Paratha.