

Vánočka (Houska) – Czech Braided Sweet Bread



Let's bake Czech Christmas bread called Vánočka or Houska. I have an authentic recipe for you, including step-by-step instructions. It is a braided fruit bread that brings the flavors of Czech Christmas.

Course	bread
Cuisine	Czech
Keyword	sweet bread
Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	40 minutes
Rising time	2 hours
Total Time	3 hours 10 minutes
Servings	1 vánočka bread
Calories	2989kcal
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Ingredients

Yest dough:

- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- ⅔ cup milk warm
- 2 teaspoons active dry yeast
- ⅓ cup granulated sugar
- ¾ stick unsalted butter softened
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 2 yolks
- ⅓ cup raisins
- ¼ cup blanched almonds roughly chopped
- ½ teaspoon nutmeg freshly grated

- 1 Tablespoon lemon zest freshly grated
- 2 Tablespoons spiced rum

To finish:

- 1 Tablespoon blanched almonds slivered or sliced
- ½ egg for eggwash
- 1 Tablespoon powdered sugar

Instructions

1. Put the flour, sugar, and active dry yeast into the mixing bowl. Add warm milk, egg yolks, and grated nutmeg. Knead for about one minute on medium speed until the ingredients are combined.
2. Turn off the mixer and add the soft or melted (not hot!) butter and salt. Turn the mixer to medium and let it work for about 9 minutes. Be patient, the fat will incorporate into the dough beautifully during this time.
3. Finally, add the raisins and nuts and knead on low speed for another minute, no longer.
4. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and form it into a ball. Transfer to a clean bowl and cover with plastic wrap or a tea towel. Let it rise in a warm place until doubled in volume.
5. Place the raised dough on a lightly floured surface and knead briefly. Divide it as follows: first in half, then divide one of the halves into about 3/5 and 2/5. These parts of the dough will form strands that will be braided together to form the individual layers of the vánočka bread.
6. Prepare a baking sheet. Grease it lightly, and place parchment paper on top. The grease will make the paper stick to the bottom of the sheet and keep it from slipping off.
7. Let's start braiding the Christmas bread. Divide the dough as follows: the first half into 4 equal pieces. 3/5 of the other half in 3 equal pieces. Divide 2/5 of the dough into 2 equal pieces. You will get 4+3+2 pieces.
8. Form each piece into a small ball. Pull the dough away from the sides and press to seal over the center of the ball. Then roll the ball between your hands into a smooth, round shape and place it seam-side down.
9. **Making the base:** The base consists of four strands. To make them, roll the four pieces of dough into even lengths. Then braid the strands together.

10. **Making the middle layer:** The middle layer of Vánočka is made up of three strands. Roll the three pieces of dough out into three equal-length strands and braid them together. Using the edge of your hand, gently flatten the center of the four-strand base. Place the middle layer of the three strands on it and press down slightly.
11. The top layer consists of two twisted strands. Using the two last pieces of dough, roll them out into strands of equal length. Twist them together and place them on top of the Vánočka, tucking the ends under the bread.
12. Let the braided bread rise in a warm place for another hour.
13. Brush the raised Vánočka on all sides with egg wash. Half an egg beaten by hand is enough for one vánočka bread. Sprinkle the top with sliced or slivered almonds.
14. Preheat the oven to 400°F/200°C (conventional oven). Put the Christmas bread in the preheated oven. If you have previously inserted skewers into the bread for a better shape, do not remove them. Bake for 10 minutes.
15. Without opening the oven, reduce the temperature to 325°F/165°C and bake for an additional 30 minutes.
16. **Important note:** About halfway through baking, the surface of the Vánočka will begin to turn golden brown. To prevent burning, loosely lay a sheet of aluminum foil on top.
17. After about 35 minutes of baking, test for doneness. Stick a wooden skewer in the middle of the Christmas bread and pull it out. If it comes out dry, the loaf is done, and you can remove it from the oven. If there's still raw dough on it, bake the bread for another five minutes. Repeat the test until the skewer comes out clean.
18. Allow the finished loaf of bread to cool on the sheet for at least thirty minutes.

Notes

- Makes 1 vánočka bread.
- **NOTE:** In the instructions, I outline the process of preparing vánočka dough using a stand mixer equipped with a kneading hook. Home bakers who have prior experience with yeast dough can prepare the dough by hand.
- MY TIP: To help the vánočka hold its shape better, stick three wooden skewers into the dough during rising and baking: at each end and in the middle.

- **SERVING:** After cooling, generously dust the vánočka with powdered sugar and cut it into slices approximately 3/4 inch (2 cm) thick. Enjoy these delectable bread slices with a cup of coffee or tea.
- **STORAGE:** Cover the bread with a clean tea towel or loosely with plastic wrap, it will last about 4-5 days on the kitchen counter. The bread also freezes well. Put the whole loaf or slices in a freezer bag and place in the freezer. It will keep for about three months.
- If you are an American with Czech roots, you may know vánočka as houska or hoska. That's because, historically, vánočka was called houska in the old Bohemian world.

Nutrition

Calories: 2989kcal | Carbohydrates: 419g | Protein: 66g | Fat: 112g | Saturated Fat: 53g | Polyunsaturated Fat: 11g | Monounsaturated Fat: 38g | Trans Fat: 3g | Cholesterol: 672mg | Sodium: 1316mg | Potassium: 1481mg | Fiber: 20g | Sugar: 86g | Vitamin A: 3026IU | Vitamin C: 10mg | Calcium: 460mg | Iron: 22mg