Enter focaccia, stage right.

From skillets to Dutch ovens, the bread-making efforts expand.

SHELLEY CIVKIN

Ladies and gentlemen, start your engines. Please. Or, in this case, your yeast.

I had to do was think about crusty bread and they were on it. I recently learned that not all Dutch ovens are created equal. They’re mostly made from cast iron covered in enamel, but not all of them can withstand the high heat you need to use. The times, they are a-changin’. For crusty bread, you have to heat the Dutch oven to about 450 degrees -- empty.

Enter focaccia, stage right. Or, if you’re Italian … entra nella scena della focaccia a destra.

I perused the myriad recipes and took a few of them on a test drive. Or test bake, as it were. The following recipe took over the others by a mile, and won in the finest focaccia category. Here’s the link to the winning One-hour Rosemary Focaccia Bread I’ve come to love: flavortheme-moments.com/one-hour-rosemary foccacia-bread. (It actually takes an hour-and-a-half, if you include the time it takes to preheat your oven.)

It’s my go-to quick bread recipe. It’s truly no-fail. Feel free to ditch the garlic and Parmesan, or add more rosemary. You can’t screw up this bread. After my first try, I was hooked. I let the gorgeous golden focaccia cool, sliced it into small rectangles, like they do in Italian restaurants, and paired it with the winning One-hour Rosemary Focaccia Bread I’ve come to love: flavortheme-moments.com/one-hour-rosemary foccacia bread. (It actually takes an hour-and-a-half, if you include the time it takes to preheat your oven.)

So, I improvised and used an ancient Magnalite aluminum-magnesium alloy Dutch oven that belonged to my friend’s late mother, I’m hoping I don’t get Alzheimer’s, what with the aluminum connection. I put about a third of the dough in it, and cooked it in my Dutch oven. (shorthand for extra virgin olive oil). Which made me wonder what an “extra virgin” is? Something to ponder another time. Never mind. Not relevant. Anyway, I’ve made this focaccia several times. Needless to say, I am not getting thinner. But my Italian is improving.

Now that I’ve pretty much nailed down challah and focaccia, I decided to branch out and try making a no-knead round crusty bread. You know, like sourdough. Minus the sour. The kind that requires you to have a Dutch oven. Google and Pinterest are way ahead of me, so they’ve been sending me nonstop recipes and pix of Dutch oven bread. All I had to do was think about crusty bread and they were on it. I recently learned that not all Dutch ovens are created equal. They’re mostly made from cast iron covered in enamel, but not all of them can withstand the high heat you need to use. The times, they are a-changin’. For crusty bread, you have to heat the Dutch oven to about 450 degrees -- empty.

Once I perfect the focaccia, I’m itching to give it a go. Since salmon season is upon us, there’s no time like the present. Harvey’s on board too, but not as a cook as much as a taste-tester. From what I can tell, it’s a deliciously easy thing to make, as long as you have truckloads of salt, sugar, dill and time. No, not thyme. Once I perfect the recipe, I’ll share it with you. But not until then.

You can try till you’re blue in the face to convince me that store-bought food is just as good as homemade, but I’m not buying it. Literally or figuratively. There’s just something about the laying on of hands, the investment of love and effort, and the satisfaction at the end of it all, that makes homemade food so very worth it.

Anyway, the bread was a marginal success. The outside looked gorgeous but, once I cut into it, parts were doughty and uncooked. But let’s be honest, I’ll try it a few more times, tweaking the temperature, increasing the rising time, etc., and hope for the best. If at first you don’t succeed, well, suck it up and try again.

I can hear some readers wondering why I would want to waste half a day baking bread from scratch, when I could just go out and buy a loaf. Well, there’s something indescribable about the smell of fresh baked bread wafting through my home. It’s a little like a comestible aphrodisiac. It makes me weak at the knees, thinking about the butter melting slowly over the hot bread, as I stuff it lovingly with anticipation. Wait, this is becoming a little X-rated--I need to get a grip. Sorry. Suffice it to say, I’m not going to give up yet. Because, why bother? Because, one day baking bread from scratch, I could get a good decaf, low-foam, lactose-free latte while I was growing my own food, baking bread and churning butter. Am I country girl at heart? Hell, no! I am about as city-fied as they come. To wit, my idea of camping is a Motel 8. And our houses? They shouldn’t be outlawed. Enough said.

Shelley Civkin, aka the Accidental Balabusta, is a happily retired librarian and communications officer. For 17 years, she wrote a weekly book review column for the Richmond Review, and currently writes a bi-weekly column about retirement for the Richmond News.