

VITAL WHEAT GLUTEN

Vital wheat gluten is like super-powered flour that is all gluten and very little starch. It's not technically flour itself, but it's made from wheat flour that has been hydrated to activate the gluten and then processed to remove everything but that gluten. It's then dried and ground back into a powder. Because it's almost pure gluten, a little goes a long way to improving the rise and chewiness in the final loaves. Generally, if you are using white bread flour you don't need to add any. However, all-purpose or whole grain flours (which have trouble developing enough gluten) need vital wheat gluten. Without it you have a rock, door stop, or paper weight. Most baking sources recommend about one tablespoon for every 1-2 cups of flour. This is often used by commercial bakeries to produce light textured breads, and can easily put the home bread baker on a par with the professionals."

DOUGH ENHANCER

What is a dough enhancer? A dough enhancer is a natural product used to make a better bread product. Commercially, most breads use this product and you will see the biggest difference if you use a dough enhancer in your whole wheat bread because the whole wheat flour is heavy and coarse unlike all-purpose flour. When you buy a dough enhancer from a store it has basically four key ingredients, gluten, acid, starch, and sugar. Those four ingredients serve key roles in developing a better bread texture by developing and strengthening the bubbles that make your bread. For white bread use 1-2 Tbsps. of dough enhancer for 12 cups of flour. For whole wheat bread use 2-4 Tbsps. of dough enhancer for 12 cups of flour." Neither ingredient is necessary to make most bread recipes. You can purchase dough enhancer and wheat gluten at most health food stores, food storage and emergency preparedness stores, and many grocery stores even carry them now.

Vital wheat gluten, dough enhancer, wheat or grain mill, electric bread maker..... I have a different story to tell.

I was born the 2nd oldest and first daughter in a family of 9 children in Payson, Utah. I know that it sounds like "Little House on the Prairie" but we had a coal burning stove in our kitchen until 1963. Until I moved out of that house, I knew my mother to bake 8-10 loaves of bread twice a week in the oven of that stove. I know that seems like a lot of bread for a family of 11 but she fed more than her own children. We all knew the day she would be baking and we never came home from school by ourselves. Our friends were always welcome to our home anytime and baking day was no different. We could smell the fresh bread aroma before we hit the front door. Mom would have finished the bread baking and would often have a few pans of rolls baked or a big hunk of dough ready to be made into hot scones. I can see these scones now, dripping with butter and honey. If it was only bread, we would fight over who would get the "heel." There was just something about the crust surrounding the end of the loaves that made it feel like you got an extra treat. It was also more sturdy and able to hold the melting butter and homemade jam better than the middle slices. Everyone was always excited over the choices of jams and jellies we had in our fridge. We never had any store brands, just those in the "good old mason jars." Several of the 8-10 loaves were eaten on the day they came out of the oven. Mom always amazed me because she never looked at a recipe. She had a big round aluminium dish pan that was the "bread making pan." In spite of recipe books that admonished to "measure all of the ingredients because any deviation from measurements could significantly alter the finished product," I never saw her measure anything. She had mixed bread so much in her life that she just knew how much of what she need to fill that pan. I heard many times, the story of how she stood on a stool as a little girl to mix bread.

As children, we grew up with what we called "The Dam Story." Mom would fill the pan with flour, build it up on one side and then make a reservoir. In the valley below, she would make little peaks in the flour representing houses. She would then pour some of the liquid ingredients into the reservoir while telling a story of the people who lived in the valley. One day it would begin to rain and the people were afraid of a break in the dam. The men would rush to the dam and mend the places that water was coming through. As she poured the remaining liquid into the reservoir, the dam would break and the little village would be flooded. In my life time, I've heard this story acted out in the bread pan many, many times. My own children have grown up with "The Dam Story." I gave the villagers names of their friends in our neighbourhood but they always escaped before the dam broke. Among my brothers and sisters and her grandchildren, "The Dam Story" is a treasured memory of our mother. Her bread was often the main course in a meal of bread and butter and a bowl of peaches, pears, cherries or apricots we had bottled during the year. I say we, because none of us ever got out of helping with this chore. I hated canning season! It seemed like the entire summer and into autumn were spent gardening, weeding, irrigating, harvesting, and then canning. I never got out of helping! Mom was one of the original emergency preparedness women. I remember her commenting at the end of each canning season about how many hundreds of jars of fruit, vegetables, juices, jams, relish, and pickles our family would have bottled. We would go to bed at night after a day of canning and listen for the "ping" of the jars sealing. When I started canning for my own family, I come to realize how rewarding that sound can be. Dad's work was seasonal and we lived on the food in the cellar during the winter. During that time in our lives, food storage was just a way of life for us. Even as mom and dad got older, they continued to garden and bottle the harvest. When they both passed away, I took several bottles of mom's relish. It almost killed me to open the last jar. I am so thankful to this day that my brothers, sisters and I were taught this useful homemaking skill. My brothers help and support their wives and are proud of the fruits of their labors. My sisters are all accomplished bakers and canners because of the things our mom taught us. My daughters and son and many of my nieces who are now mothers themselves have also learned this skill that is somewhat rare in their generation. Mom never had a gas or electric oven with a timer or temperature control on it. She had a bucket of coal and a bunch of healthy kids. She never used "vital wheat gluten" or "dough enhancer" and she made the best bread in Payson, in my opinion, of course. She didn't have a bread maker, just an old pan and two strong, loving arms.