

Prósfora - An Offering for the Liturgy

“I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.” (John 6:51)

“And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body.’” (Matthew 26:26)

“And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.’” (Luke 22:19)

“When He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.’” (1 Corinthians 11:24)



Do's and Dont's

The prósfora and its preparation (baking) is an essential part of the Divine Liturgy. It is therefore a liturgical act in itself, and must always be done with the blessing, and under the direction, of the priest.

First, before starting to bake Prósfora, please ask your parish priest for a blessing (permission).

Next, seek training. The priest and/or experienced bakers in your parish can advise you about any variations or customs that apply to your parish and guide your first steps.

Then, obtain a prósfora seal. Your parish priest can help you with this.

It is a good idea to have baking pans, and perhaps a mixing bowl, set aside exclusively for baking the prósfora. This is not a requirement, but it is a common practice.

Always remember that Prósfora is made from only four ingredients: wheat flour (white), yeast, salt, and water. Never use any oil or shortening; never grease the baking pans. Never use any sugar or sweetener.



Not Just Anyone Can Bake the Prósfora

In an absolutely and very real way, the Divine Liturgy extends from our kitchen, where we bake the bread, to the Holy Altar at our parish church, upon which that same bread becomes the Body of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ.

Therefore it is always the priest who will invite individuals to participate in the sacred activity of baking the prósfora. Only a member of the Orthodox Church who is in good spiritual standing, whose conscience is clean, and who has the blessing of a priest may bake prósfora.

In a parish church the faithful chosen and trained for this holy effort typically will take turns baking the prósfora. In monasteries, the géronta or geróntissa (abbot or abbess) assigns to one or more monastics of virtuous life to bake the prósfora.



The Meaning of the Offering

Bread is used to become the Body of Jesus Who is the Bread of Life, of Which, if any man eat, he shall never hunger. This bread which we bake and give to be used in the Liturgy also expresses the offering of our life to God. The Greek word for altar bread is prósfora which means an offering to God. Bread is used as an offering because it represents life. Once consumed, it becomes part of us; i.e., it becomes our flesh and bones.



Baking With a Prayer

Preparing the bread that will become the Body and Blood of Christ is an ancient Orthodox Church tradition. It is a great privilege and requires, of course, a blessing from the priest.

Since the Divine Liturgy begins in the home of the one who bakes the prósfora, this act is itself a sacred and unique event taking place in our kitchen, very specific preparations and prayers are in order. All who are at home, or visiting in our home, should be aware that a holy and solemn event is taking place.

Traditionally women prepare for baking the Altar Bread by cleaning the house, bathing, and wearing clean clothing. Customarily a candle is lit and incense is offered in the home censer along with certain prayers. Often a pious woman will feel moved to come to the Mystery of Holy Confession before beginning this sacred undertaking.

By reflecting on the bread's use, the baking of it becomes a prayerful and solemn undertaking. Needless to say, before one begins the baking process, prayers are in order. After the bread has been baked, the prayer may be said by the family.

Prayers of Preparation Before Baking the Prósfora

First, the Trisagion Prayers are recited. Then:

A Prayer of Repentance:

Lord our God, good and merciful, I acknowledge all my sins which I have committed every day of my life, in thought, in word, and in deed, in body and soul alike. I am heartily sorry that I have ever offended You, Lord: in Your mercy forgive me all my past transgressions and absolve me from them. I firmly resolve, with the help of Your Grace, to amend my way of life and to sin no more, that I may walk in the way of righteousness and offer praise and glory in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and to ages of ages. Amen.

A Prayer of Blessing

Bless my hands, Lord, that as I give myself to the making of this bread I may honor You so that this bread may be holy. Accept my gift and make all Your people worthy to receive the Holy Gifts at the Divine Liturgy when You consecrate this prósfora and give it back to us as Your precious Body.

Prayer Before Making The Prósfora:

Almighty God, our Help and Refuge, the Fountain of Wisdom and the Tower of Strength, Who knows that I can do nothing without Your guidance and help: assist me, I pray, and direct me with Your divine wisdom and power, that I may prepare this prósfora, faithfully and diligently, according to Your will, so that it may be a blessing to myself, to my family, and to all Your faithful. For Yours is the Kingdom and the power and the glory: of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and to ages of ages. Amen.

Through the prayers of our holy fathers, Lord Jesus Christ our God have mercy on us and save us. Amen.

Prayer While Preparing and Baking the Prósfora

While preparing the dough, kneading it, and preparing it for baking the Jesus Prayer should be constantly on our lips:

Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me.

When imprinting the seal into the finished loaf before its final rising, it is customary to press the seal down firmly for as long as it takes to recite the Lord's Prayer (the "Our Father").

During the time the bread is rising, while it is baking, and when it is cooling down we recite the Jesus Prayer, read the Holy Scriptures or a spiritual book, and/or have church music playing.

It is not appropriate, of course, to have the television, loud music, or other secular entertainment going on during the prósfora-baking process.

Prayers of Preparation After Baking the Prósfora

Again, the Trisagion Prayers are recited. Then:

Prayer After The Bread Is Baked:

Lord, this bread that I have baked represents each one in my family and everyone in my parish. I am offering myself to You, my very life, in humble obedience and total commitment to You. I place myself on Your holy altar through this bread to be used by You in any way that You feel will further Your kingdom. Accept my gift and make me worthy to receive the greater gift that You will give me when You consecrate this bread and give it back to us as Your Precious Body. Amen.

Through the prayers of our holy fathers, Lord Jesus Christ our God have mercy on us and save us. Amen.



About the Prósfora Seals

There are two customs within the Orthodox Church for preparing the prósfora and for imprinting the top with a seal.

In the Byzantine tradition, a large loaf marked with ΙΣ-ΧΣ-ΝΙ-ΚΑ in the center, surrounded by several other seals, is used. As explained below, the single loaf signifies the one Body of Christ.

In the Slavic tradition, five small loaves are used in honor of the “feeding of the 5,000.” These small loaves are made with two layers to represent both the two-fold nature of Christ (divine and human) as well as the uniting of heaven and earth.



Greek and Slavic Prósfora seals

Thus, in bringing a loaf of bread to God, a prósforon, we are offering our whole life to Him, we are offering Him a gift from, and on behalf of, the entire Church. This oblation, or offering, is the gift of our love.

The priest receives this gift and places it on the holy altar. Thus God accepts our gift, and it passes into His possession. God then transforms the gift through the Holy Spirit and gives it back to us as His Precious Body. We give ourselves to God and He, in turn, gives Himself to us. We come to the Liturgy not just receive Christ, but also to give ourselves to Christ.

During preparation of the Eucharist, the priest conducts the proskomidé in which he first cuts out the center of the stamped design that reads “IC, XC, NIKA” (“Jesus Christ Conquers”).

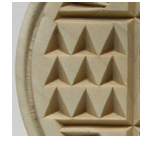


This is the portion that becomes the Body of Christ (the Lamb).



Next the large triangle on the left is cut in honor of the Virgin Mary.

Then the nine small triangles on the right are cut to commemorate the angels, the prophets, and the Apostles; the holy hierarchs, the martyrs, and the monastic saints; the holy unmercenaries, Joachim and Anna as well as the patron saint and the saint commemorated that day, and finally the saint whose Liturgy is being celebrated (Saint John Chrysostom or Saint Basil the Great).



About the Proskomidé

What does the priest do with the bread you bake so that it may be used at the Divine Liturgy?

The Proskomidé is a Service performed by the priest in a quiet voice at the Próthesis (the Table of Preparation or “side altar”) while the Holy of Holies is closed just prior to the Divine Liturgy. It is also called the Service of Preparation since the bread and wine are prepared to become the Body and Blood of Christ.

First, the priest prays before the closed Beautiful Gate, enters the Holy of Holies, and puts on the priestly vestments. After washing his hands and arranging everything on the próthesis, he is ready to begin the Proskomidé.

Following a blessing, the priest takes the prósforon and with a small “spear” (a wedge-shaped knife) makes the sign of the Cross over it three times, saying the words, “In remembrance of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Next, the priest cuts a cube-shaped portion out of the center of the prósforon, containing the letters ΙΧΘΥΣ-NI-KΑ. This portion of the prósforo represents Christ, and is called the “Lamb.” It is placed on the holy dískos (the paten, a metal plate).

Turning the Lamb over, the priest cuts a cross in the bottom almost all the way to the top crust. Placing it right-side up again, he then pierces the right side of the Lamb (ΙΧ) with the spear, saying the words of the Evangelist John, “One of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately there came forth blood and water. And he that saw it bore record, and his record is true.” As these words are spoken, wine and water are poured into the chalice (cup).

Following this preparation of the Lamb, the priest cuts out the triangular portion of the prósforon at the left side of the seal in honor of the Theotokos, and places it at the right side of the Lamb (on the left side of the dískos).

At the right side of the seal is a pattern of nine small triangles, arranged in three rows with three columns. These nine portions represent the nine ranks, or categories, of the beings in heaven: the Angels, the Prophets and the Apostles; the hierarchs, the martyrs, and the monastic saints; and the unmercenary physicians, Joachim and Anna and the patron saint of the church along with the saints commemorated, and finally the saint who composed the liturgy being celebrated (Saint John Chrysostom or Saint Basil the Great).

These nine portions are placed at the left side the Lamb (on the right side of the dískos).

Finally, the priest removes small portions from the prósforon for our hierarch, as well as for the living and those fallen asleep. The very last small portion is removed for himself, saying “Remember also, Lord, my unworthiness; and forgive me of all my offenses, both voluntary and involuntary.” All these portions are placed on the diskos below the Lamb.

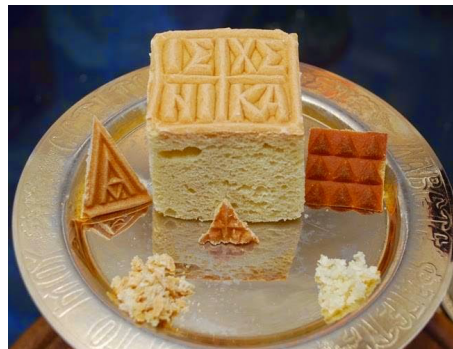
The remainder of the prósforon used for the Proskomidé, as well as any other Prósfora brought for that Liturgy, are then cut into small cubes and placed in a basket to be blessed and distributed as antídoron.

A portion from one of the loaves, with the letters ΙΣ-ΧΣ-NI-KΑ, is customarily set aside and wrapped. This portion, the *ípsoma*, is taken by, or given to, the one who baked the *prósfora*, as well as any particular individual for whom the *prósfora* might have been offered.

At the conclusion of the Proskomidé, the priest covers the *dískos* with a metal *ásterisk* (star), covers the *dískos* and the chalice with small veils, and places the *aéra* (large veil) over the covered Holy Gifts. He censes the gifts and prays that the Lord bless them and remember those who have offered them and those for whom they are offered.

The sacred instruments used and actions performed in the Proskomidé have symbolic meanings. The *dískos* represents the caves in Bethlehem and at Golgotha. The *ásterisk* signifies the star of Bethlehem as well as the Cross. The veils symbolize the swaddling clothes and the winding sheet at the tomb of the Savior. The chalice is the cup in which Jesus Christ sanctified the wine. The Lamb indicates the judgment, passion, and death of Jesus Christ and its piercing by the spear is the piercing of Christ's body by one of the soldiers. The censuring signifies the overshadowing grace and power of the Holy Spirit upon the Gifts and upon those who share in the Mystery of Holy Communion.

The arrangement of all the portions in a certain order on the *dískos* represents the Body of Christ, the entire Kingdom of God, whose members consist of the Theotokos, the angels, all saints in heaven, all the faithful Orthodox Christians living on earth, and all the faithful who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection. At the center of the *dískos* is the Lord Himself, our Savior.



Bringing the Prósfora to the Church

The Prósforon/Proósfora is/are needed at the church in advance of the scheduled Liturgy. The evening before is a good guideline to follow.



An Important Note

Use a toothpick to poke holes in the dough, all around the seal, going all the way down to the pan.

This is a critical step, required to allow steam to escape from the loaf while it is baking.

On the one hand, this procedure will help the *prósfora* bread rise evenly.

More importantly, it will prevent the buildup of steam under the upper crust that creates a “bubble” just under the seal. If that were to happen, the seal will be destroyed; it will collapse and crumble – perhaps during the cooling process, and certainly when the priest attempts to make the first cut when preparing the Lamb.



The bread you bake with your hands becomes the Body of Christ. What a great privilege! What a beautiful gift you present to the Lord!

A Prósfora (Altar Bread) Recipe

Training:

Before starting to bake Prósfora, please get permission from your parish priest.

Next, obtain a religious seal, and seek training.

Your priest can advise you on both those points.

Ingredients:

1 pkg. dry yeast

2 ½ cups water

2 tsp. salt

6 ¾ to 7 cups flour

Directions:

Dilute yeast in warm (not hot) water to activate yeast

Add salt, then half of flour and stir

Mix remainder of flour with hand until dough is firm

Knead until dough is smooth

Divide dough and place in 8, 9 or 10 inch pans that have been floured only

Do not grease pans

Keep in mind that dough should be smoothed out to cover the bottom half of the depth of pan.

This recipe makes two loaves of bread.

You will need to double the recipe for four loaves.

Take religious seal and dip in flour, shaking off any excess flour that may accumulate, and press seal firmly in center of dough.

Use a sharp knife or toothpick to prick the dough all around the seal.

Remove seal and let dough rise until it is almost doubled in bulk.

Remember, dough will also rise in oven and too much rising can erase seal.

Bake in 400 degree oven for approximately 30 minutes or until done.

Wrap in clean cloth while cooling so crust will soften.

Place bread in freezer bags.

If the bread is intended for extras, please mark the date on the freezer bag and put it in the freezer in the church kitchen.

This recipe was taken from

A LENTEN COOKBOOK FOR ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS

The Proskomidé and the Baking of Prósfora

The Proskomidé

The Proskomidé is a preparation service that takes place prior to the Divine Liturgy. The priest normally serves the Proskomidé alone, either during or immediately prior to Matins which immediately precedes the Liturgy.

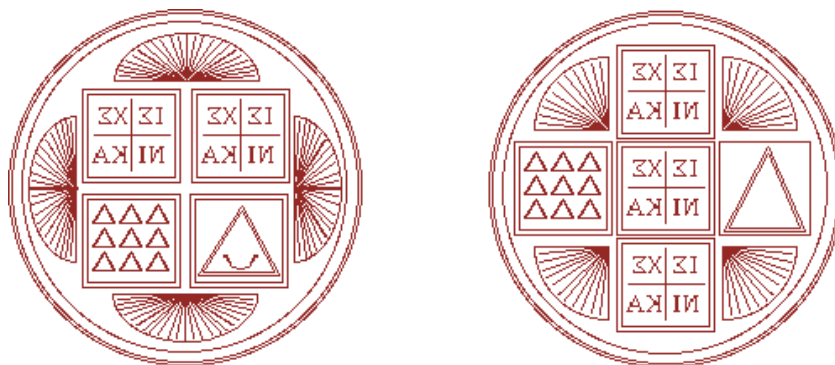
After the priest recites the Entrance Prayers and puts on his vestments, he goes to the small table on the north – or left – side of the sanctuary to prepare the gifts of bread and wine that will be used in the Divine Liturgy. The table is referred to as the Holy Próthesis, the Preparation Table, or the Oblation Table.

The word “proskomidé” means “bringing” and harkens back to the ancient times when the first Christians went to church bringing with them the bread and wine, as well as other necessary items, such as candles, incense, etc. This, of course, is still our practice today, as the faithful provide these items to their local parish priest for the divine services.

The Prósfora

The bread used in the Proskomidé is baked by the parishioners, and is brought to the church in advance of the Divine Liturgy. The bread is made in the shape of a round loaf called a “prósforon” (singular) or “prósfora” (plural). The priest needs at least one prósforon from which he will “offer” the Liturgy as a gift to God from the believers. Generally the priest will use two loaves on a Sunday, although strictly speaking the rubrics call for the use of five loaves. Those baking the prósfora should consult with the priest in advance to determine how many loaves he will need.

The Prósfora must be made exclusively of pure wheat flour (bleached, unbleached, or even whole wheat flour may be used). The Prósfora is leavened with yeast, and must not contain any sugar or shortening or oil in it or on it. On the upper side, the Prósfora is sealed with a round, wooden stamp (or seal). There are several patterns that may be used, two of which appear as illustrated:



Baking the Bread

Baking Prósfora is not just another kitchen task. It is a sacred and holy work, in fact it is itself a liturgical act, and should be done in an atmosphere of prayer and piety. Throughout the process, remember that this bread which your hands are fashioning will truly become the Body of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ.

Suggested Order for Baking Prósfora

Set out ingredients and utensils, and prepare working space.

Throughout the entire process, never use any ingredients except flour, water, yeast, and salt.

Before an icon (or before the family icon corner), place a lighted candle and/or a censer with burning charcoal and incense.

All who participate in baking the Prósfora should say the following prayer:

O Lord, this bread which we will bake represents each one of us in this family and in our congregation. We offer ourselves to You, Who are our very Life, in humble obedience and in total commitment to Your will. We place ourselves on the Holy Altar through this bread, to be used by You in any way that You know will be to our spiritual benefit and to the benefit of Your holy Church. Accept our offering, and make us worthy to receive the greater Gift that You will return to us when You consecrate this bread as Your most precious body. Amen.

Begin preparing the Prósfora, accompanied by readings from the Book of Psalms.

Those making the bread should take turns kneading and reading the Psalms.

The following recipe may be used, and remember:

Do not use any oil, grease, or shortening of any kind!

Do not use any sugar, or any other sweetener!

Only use yeast; do not use any other leavening agent!

After the dough rises once, knead it again. Press the seal down on the loaf for as long as it takes to quietly recite the Lord's Prayer, then remove it carefully. Let the loaf rise a second time.

Maintain a constant attitude of prayer.

After the bread is baked, it should be allowed to cool and placed in an appropriate area of the house until it is time to bring it to the church to be used by the priest in the Preparation of the Gifts before the Divine Liturgy.



Suggested Recipe for Baking Prósfora (for two loaves)

Ingredients:

- 1 packet yeast
- 1-1/2 cups warm water (the amount will vary!)
- 5 Cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 large mixing bowl
- 1 Prósfora seal

Procedure:

1. Dissolve yeast in warm water.
2. Add salt and flour.
3. Throughout the entire process, never use any ingredients except flour, water, yeast, and salt.
4. Knead until smooth. Add more flour or water until texture of dough is moist but not sticky. Place in large bowl, cover, and let rise.
5. When doubled in size, knead again. Then divide dough in half, shape into round loaves and place in round cake pans which have been floured only. (*Do not grease or oil pans!*)
6. Dust top of each loaf lightly with flour and flatten slightly.
7. Dip Prósfora seal in flour and then press firmly on top of each loaf until impression on loaf is clear and distinct. Hold seal down for as long as it takes to quietly recite the Lord's Prayer.
8. If dough is not firm enough to accept seal, re-knead adding more flour.
9. With a toothpick, poke deep holes on top of the loaf, around the seal. This is a vital step to prevent the formation of an air bubble under the crust while baking, which makes the prósfora unusable by the Priest for the Oblation.
10. Cover loaves with towel, and allow to rise again until seal is even with edge of loaf.
11. Bake in preheated oven at 350° for 45 to 60 minutes (the time will vary!).
12. Remove from oven and allow to cool.



A Greek Prósfora Recipe

Note: This recipe is copied from Vefa Alexiadou's wonderful cookbook, "Greek Pastries and Desserts" (ISBN 960-85018-7-3). I cannot praise this book enough, and recommend it to anyone interested in baking. You will find a load of great recipes, including a hefty section of Orthodox holiday breads.

Yields 2 Altar Breads

Preparation time 40 minutes

Baking time 20 minutes

Ingredients:

6 cups country or all purpose flour

1 teaspoon salt

2 cups tepid water (100 °F)

1 recipe, Traditional Sourdough Starter {not reproduced here} or

1 oz fresh yeast or

2 teaspoons dry yeast

Procedure:

If using sourdough starter, reactivate it the night before.

Otherwise, dissolve the yeast in one half cup of the tepid water.

Add 3-4 tablespoons flour and mix well.

Let it stand for about 10 minutes or until doubled in bulk.

Meanwhile sift the flour with the salt into a kneading basin and make a well in the center.

Pour in the sour-dough starter or the yeast mixture and the remaining tepid water.

Gradually incorporate flour from the sides of the well into the water until all the flour is moist, and knead until a smooth and elastic dough is formed.

Cover the dough with plastic wrap, and let it rise in a warm place until doubled in bulk, about 2 hours.

Knead the dough again for about 5 minutes and divide into 4 equal parts.

Shape each part into a ball.

Slightly flatten the balls into rounds, pressing with your palms, and flour them generously.

Put the two rounds, one on top of the other, in a well-floured baking pan.

Dip the religious seal in flour, shake off the excess and press it firmly onto the floured surface.

Let the seal remain on dough for about 5 minutes and carefully remove it.

Place the other two rounds, the same way, onto a separate pan.

Cover and leave in a warm place to rise until doubled in bulk.

Just before baking, prick inside and outside corners of cross with a wooden skewer to attain a flat-top appearance of the breads.

Bake in a 400 °F oven for 15-20 minutes, taking care not to burn them.

As soon as they are removed from the oven, brush them with a little water, using a pastry brush.

Cover the altar breads with a cotton towel and leave them to cool on a rack.

Another Prósfora Recipe and Baking Instructions

1 Things you will need

2 Ingredients

3 Kneading

4 Shaping the cakes

5 Baking

Before you start, please ask your parish priest for blessing to bake prósfora for your community.

He and/or experienced bakers in your parish may also advise you on any variations/customs that apply to your locale and guide your first steps.

1 Things you will need

The mixing bowl, cloth towels and pans that I use for prósfora are dedicated to this purpose and not used in any other setting.

- a. Cooking pans: I use Wilton round 9 in pans. They're cheap and distribute heat very well. I was less successful using more expensive aluminum pans.
- b. Single use toothpicks.
- c. Orthodox Bread Seal.
- d. Cotton towels.

2 Ingredients

This makes about 4 prósfora loaves. There should be no other ingredients! No oil for sure.

- 4 cups wheat flour
- 2.5 cups water
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 level teaspoon dry yeast

What type of flour to use? It certainly should be wheat-based. Should it be whole, pastry, or unbleached white? My thoughts: first, this is not a baking contest. Way back when, before there were many kinds of flour, people would mill the grains and sift the flour. I'd say, use the flour that people consider acceptable for baking in the area where you live.

Notes:

- You may need to adjust the quantities of water/yeast based on the type of flour used.
- I find that unbleached white flour is the easiest to work with. I use 5 Roses; King Arthur or Bob's Red Mill are good though more expensive. Ceresota has never worked for me, as have not any of the brands bought at Costco or Sam's.
- Yeast: Costco sells it in packages of 2x2lb for about \$5, else you can pay the same amount for 4oz jars at grocery stores or get it in tiny packet sizes.
- Water should be lukewarm - cold water will impede rising, hot water will kill the yeast.
- Do the work in a warm place, away from air currents.

3 Kneading

Place the flour in a mixing bowl. Shape a dip in the middle, large enough to contain about 1 cup of water. Pour yeast and 1 cup water. Sprinkle the salt in the corners. Cover bowl with a towel and let sit for 5-10 minutes.

Start incorporating flour into the water/yeast combination. Pour more water as you go. Make a ball of dough to which you keep adding more water and more flour. It probably takes 15-20 minutes to work this amount of flour into dough. The dough should not feel dry to the fingers, and yet not that wet to be overly sticky. Cover the bowl with towels, and let dough rise for 1 hour.

1 hour later, the dough must have risen some. Knead it again for 10-15 minutes, then cover and let rise for another 1 hour.

4 Shaping the cakes

Lightly sprinkle the baking pan with flour. Grab a chunk of dough (about your closed fist size) and, using the minimum amount of handling, shape it into a flat round cake (pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake...) The fewer moves you do the better; this is not the time to knead and play with the dough. Generously douse the cake with flour on both sides, then shake off the excess flour and place on the baking pan. Repeat the process with a 2nd cake and place it on top of the first.

Dip the seal in flour, knock it to shake off the flour, and then stamp it on top of the cake with all your strength. Lift it carefully so you do not alter the seal imprint on the dough. This may take some practice to get right.

Cover baking pans with towels and let rise again for ~30 minutes in a warm place.

5 Baking

Using a toothpick, poke holes in the dough, all around the seal, going all the way down to the pan. This will help the prósfora bread rise evenly.

Preheat the oven at 375 F and bake for ~25 minutes. Once out, wrap prósfora in a cotton towel until it cools.