

It's Alive - Creating Your Starter

The novel thing about sourdough baking is that it requires that you keep something alive in your fridge. I think of my starter as a pet, kept and fed so that we will have all the bread we need. Sourdough "starter" is a batter of flour and water, filled with living yeast and bacteria. The yeast and bacteria form a stable symbiotic relationship, and (as long as you keep the starter fed) can live for centuries, a thriving colony of micro organisms. To make sourdough bread, you blend the starter with some flour and make dough. The yeast propagates, and leavens your bread. This is how you make your starter:

Select a container that your "pet" will live in. A wide-mouthed glass jar is best. I use a glass jar with a rubber and wireframe seal. A small crock with a loose lid is also great; these can be bought in cheap sets for serving soup. You can also use a rubbermaid or tupperware container. I've begun starters using the plastic containers that take-out Chinese soup comes in, and then transferred them to jars later! A wide-mouthed mayonnaise or pickle jar will also do just fine. Metallic containers are a bad idea; some of them are reactive and can ruin your starter (for the same reason, avoid using metal utensils to stir your starter).

Blend a cup of warm water and a cup of flour, and pour it into the jar. That's the whole recipe! I use plain, unbleached bread flour most of the time, but I've had good results with all-purpose and whole-wheat flour, too. If you want, you can add a little commercial yeast to a starter to "boost" it. If you do this, sourdough snobs will look down their nose at you - but who cares about snobs? I personally find that (at least here where I live) no yeast "boost" is necessary, and I can make "real" sourdough with no trouble. But if you are having trouble, go ahead and cheat. I won't tell. Note that starter made with commercial yeast often produces a bread with less distinctive sour flavour than the real thing.

Every 24 Hours, Feed the Starter. You should keep the starter in a warm place; 70-80 degrees Fahrenheit. This allows the yeast already present in the flour (and in the air) to grow rapidly. Temperatures hotter than 100 deg F or so will kill it. You can take comfort from the fact that almost nothing else will do so. The way you feed the starter is to (A) throw away half of it and then (B) add a half-cup of flour and a half-cup of water. Do this every 24 hours. Within three or four days (it can take longer, a week or more, and it can happen more quickly) you should start getting lots of bubbles throughout, and a pleasant sour or beery smell. The starter may start to puff up, too. This is good. Here's the gist: When your starter develops a bubbly froth, it is done. You have succeeded. If this sounds brain-dead simple, that's because it is. People who didn't believe the Earth was round did this for Millenia.

Refrigerate the Starter. Keep the starter in your fridge, with a lid on it. Allow a little breathing space in the lid. If you're using a mayo or pickle jar, punch a hole in the lid with a nail, that kind of thing. Once the starter is chilled, it needs to be fed only once a week. Realistically, you can get away with less; it's important to remember that your starter is a colony of life-forms that are almost impossible to kill (except with extreme heat). Even starving them is difficult.

Care and Feeding: Hooch

Aside from weekly feeding, the only other thing you need to worry about is hooch. Hooch is a layer of watery liquid (often dark) that contains alcohol. It smells a bit like beer, because it is a bit like beer - but don't drink it! Hooch builds up in your starter, especially in the fridge. Just pour it off or stir it back in. It doesn't hurt anything. If your starter is looking dry, stir it back in. If your starter is plenty wet, pour it off. Just remember that hooch is nothing to worry about!

Sourdough Baking Step One: Proofing the Sponge

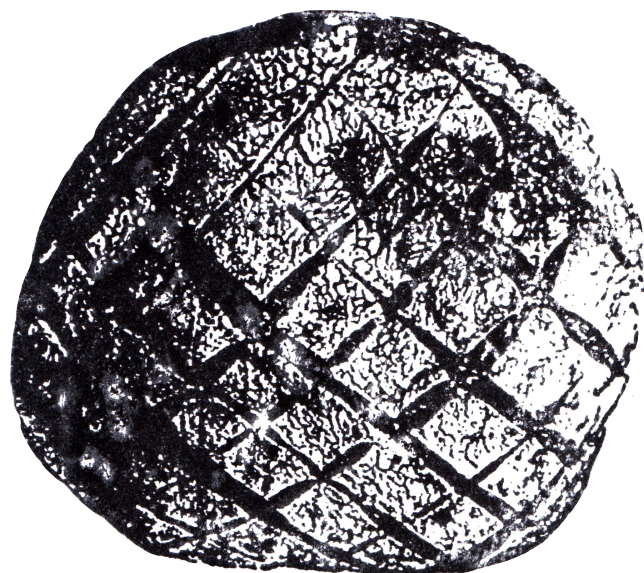
Several hours before you plan to make your dough (recipe below), you need to make a sponge. A "sponge" is just another word for a bowl of warm, fermented batter. This is how you make your sponge.

Take your starter out of the fridge. Pour it into a large glass or plastic bowl. Meanwhile, wash the jar and dry it. You may also wish to pour boiling water over it, since you don't want other things growing in there with your pet!

Add a cup of warm water and a cup of flour to the bowl. Stir well, and set it in a warm place for several hours. This is called "proofing," another word for fermenting. Sourdough bakers have their own language; use it to impress your friends ;)

Watch for Froth and Sniff. When your sponge is bubbly and has a white froth, and it smells a little sour, it is ready. The longer you let the sponge sit, the more sour flavour you will get.

The proofing-time varies. Some starters can proof up to frothiness in an hour or two. Some take 6-8 hours, or even longer. Just experiment and see how long yours takes. If you're going to bake in the morning, set your sponge out to proof overnight.





How To Revive Your Dried Sourdough Starter/Bug

Put the dried starter into a larger jar, 300 - 500ml should be bigger enough.

Soak the dried starter in 1Tbs. lukewarm purified, spring water or boiled water, left to cool.

Stir in 1Tbs. bread flour, cover loosely with plastic and let sit at room temperature for 24 hours.

While not necessary, stirring again once or twice during this 24 hours will expedite the process.

Stir in another Tbs. of flour and 1 tsp. of purified water and let it sit as before.

Within the next 24 to 36 hours you will most likely start to see the bubbling action of fermentation begin. (If not, something is most likely wrong and you should try again).

Now stir in 1/3 cup flour and 1/4 cup of water to your activated starter and continue to build the starter with once or twice daily feedings until you have a sufficient quantity to use for baking (amounts vary per recipe). You may double or triple the quantity of starter with each feeding.

Feeding with approximately equal weights of flour and water (vs. equal volumes) will result in a good consistency for your starter.

Once you have a cup or two of healthy starter, store your starter in a container with a loose fitting lid in the refrigerator. Once refrigerated, weekly feeding is sufficient to keep your starter happy. Just remember to hold back some starter when baking as your seed starter for the next time. If things go bad at anytime it is easy to start a new starter from scratch.

Basic Sourdough Loaf

Ingredients

500grms white bread flour (or you can combine white flour with wholemeal, rye just note that different flours will absorb more or less water so adjust accordingly.)

2tsp salt

250/300ml of lukewarm water – filtered or boiled water left to cool, tap water will have chlorine in it which can affect the starter

150grms or half your jar of starter

Put the starter in a bowl and add the water then flour and then the salt.

Mix with a spoon and cover with a tea towel and leave for 20mins, this lets the flour absorb the water.

The dough will be quite wet and it means that it can be messy to work with the idea is to not add too much extra flour, as the wetter the dough the better. But in reality I do often add extra flour to make the process easier.

You can knead the bread in one go for 10 mins or a couple of minutes, leave it for an hour, knead it again and so on until the dough becomes a nice smooth and silky ball. Fit the kneading around your day, also it is guaranteed that when you start kneading the phone will ring or someone comes to the door,

Once the dough is ready put it in a bowl and cover with a damp tea towel or glad wrap, put a little oil on it so it doesn't stick to the dough.

You can now leave the dough to rise for 4 – 6 hours or put in the fridge overnight. If you put it in the fridge, the next day take it out when you are ready to bake it and let it warm up for an hour or so.

If you have just left it for the 4-6 hours, you can shape the loaf, bake it in a tin, make rolls, French sticks whatever shape you want. The dough will tend not to hold its shape if you turn it out from the bowl, it sometimes acts like a jellyfish, if you have a wicker basket you can leave the dough to rise in that, sprinkle the basket with flour before putting in the dough, leaving it's 4 – 6 hour rise and then turn it out onto a pizza stone or baking sheet just before it goes into the oven.

The oven should be about 220deg c to 250deg c for the first 10mins and then turn the oven down to 90/200deg c for about 25 – 30mins. The bread is done when it sounds hollow if tapped on the bottom. If you aren't sure it is cooked, turn the oven off and leave the loaf in the oven for another 10mins.

Best to wait for the loaf to cool before cutting or breaking it open, if you can resist.

Any questions contact me at simon.gray@skillwise.org.nz

Further Information:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTAiDki7AQA

robdunnlab.com/projects/wildsourdough/

