

Association of Glasgow Bakers

STARTERS

The Beginning of Your Sourdough Journey



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INTRODUCTION

If you are anything like me, when you first start making sourdough bread, it can feel like you have taken on a new dark ceremonial practice, with talk of feeding regimes, hydration, hungry starters and schedules for baking...

Intimidating though they may be, understanding these technical elements will absolutely help you to make great bread with ease!

This booklet aims to help you get started along your journey to making beautiful sourdough breads at home. We begin by discussing sourdough starters.

I recommend reading this through with a cuppa before you get started and for ongoing support at any point during your journey visit our dedicated group:

Glasgow Bakers Group

HOW TO OBTAIN A SOURDOUGH STARTER

If you want to make traditional, healthy sourdough bread, you're going to need a starter. You have a few options in obtaining one:

1. You can attempt to capture the wild yeasts and bacteria present in your flour by creating your own sourdough starter.
2. You can purchase an established sourdough starter that already contains reliable yeasts and bacteria.
3. You can get a bit of established sourdough starter from a friend who is baking with sourdough.

If you are reading this guide you may well have purchased one of our reliable starters, thank you for your purchase, read on and I shall explain the starter process in full.

HOW TO MAKE YOUR OWN STARTER

If you're interested in creating your own sourdough starter you'll need some basic ingredients — flour and water — and some basic equipment and conditions. The conditions necessary to make a sourdough starter include:

- A warm temperature between 18°C and 29°C or thereabouts.
- A non-reactive vessel in which you make and store the starter (glass or plastic).
- A non-reactive stirring device to incorporate air.
- A breathable lid such as a clean towel or
- muslin cloth.

Once you have these things figured out you can combine equal parts of flour and water (preferably freshly ground flour and filtered water). This doesn't need to be measured precisely.

Stir vigorously to mix thoroughly and to incorporate air, then cover with a breathable lid. Allow to sit in a warm place for 12 to 24 hours. Feeding every 12 hours will increase the rate at which your sourdough starter is multiplying its organisms; if feeding every 24 hours this will take a bit longer, but may be more sustainable depending on your time commitment.

At the 12 or 24 hour mark hopefully you will begin to see some bubbles, indicating that organisms are present. Repeat the feeding with equal parts of water and flour. Stir vigorously, cover, and wait another 12 to 24 hours.

At this point, you should start removing approximately half of the starter before every feeding and discarding it. This allows the yeast organisms in your flour to multiply without overflowing your jar.

After about 5 to 7 days your sourdough starter should have enough yeasts and bacteria to be useful in baking.

If, like me, you don't want to put your well kept starter into the trash and waste it, you can either gift this to a friend so that they may begin their own sourdough starter journey, or you can use it to make any number of things as a snack.

I shall cover the use of sourdough starter discard in another document.

THE BENEFITS OF OBTAINING AN ESTABLISHED STARTER

You may go through the above steps in making your own starter only to find that it smells or tastes off or that the bread and other baked goods it produces isn't all that pleasant in flavour. That is where an established culture comes in.

An established culture is easier in that the process of getting it started is faster and simpler. It is also more reliable in that it already contains active yeasts that have been perpetuated over a long period of time and therefore are stable, active, and resilient.

And finally, an established culture, because of its established bacteria and yeast, can guarantee a more pleasantly flavored bread product.

SOURDOUGH STARTER INSTRUCTIONS

Before You Begin

- Your sourdough starter has been shipped in a dehydrated state. The starter is shelf-stable and can be used any time in the next few months. Store the starter in a cool dry place.
- Whenever possible, use filtered non-chlorinated water when feeding your sourdough starter.
- Use the same kind of flour as the starter was grown in (white, whole wheat, rye, etc.) to activate this starter. Once your starter has been fully activated, you can feed the starter and bake with a different variety of flour if desired.
- If you are culturing multiple products (e.g., different varieties of yogurt, buttermilk, kefir, sourdough, kombucha, etc.) or baking with commercial yeast, be sure to keep a distance of at least several feet between cultures so they don't cross-contaminate each other. Over time, cross-contamination can weaken the cultures.

ACTIVATING THE SOURDOUGH STARTER

Day 1

- Place the contents of the package into a clean quart (or larger) wide-mouth canning jar or similar container.
- Add equal measures of tepid (room temperature) water and flour and stir vigorously. Be sure to incorporate a significant amount of air into the mixture.
- Cover loosely with a towel or muslin cloth secured with a rubber band (or simply do not secure the lid of your jar fully) and place in a warm area (21°C to 29°C) for approximately 12 to 24 hours. The warmer the spot, the more quickly the starter will activate.
- An oven with just the pilot light or oven light turned on can work well as will a high shelf or a food dehydrator with a low temperature setting. Be sure to verify that the spot where your sourdough culture is sitting is within the 21°C to 29°C temperature range. Temperatures outside that range can be problematic for activating the culture and can even damage or kill the culture.

Day 2

- Mix in equal measures of water and flour. Be sure to incorporate a significant amount of air into the mixture. Cover and return to the warm spot for 12-24 hours.

Day 3

- Discard all but half of the flour and water mixture. Mix in equal measures of water and flour. Repeat this process every 12 - 24 hours until the mixture becomes light and bubbly. If the mixture is kept quite warm, this process may be concluded within the first several days. For cooler spots, it may take several more days to complete the process. It is common for sourdough starter to take 3 to 7 days to activate.
- Once the starter is bubbling reliably within several hours of being fed, feed the starter for two more cycles then cover loosely with a lid and place it in the refrigerator until you are ready to bake with it. The lid may be tightened once the mixture becomes dormant and minimal carbon dioxide is being produced.

Onwards

- Your starter should now be nice and active. It's probably time to go ahead and give him/her a name!
- To maintain your starter, continue to feed it each day as in the steps discussed in Day 3.
- If you wish you can keep your starter in the fridge and feed approx twice a week.
- Be sure to use a sufficiently sized container and place a cloth or paper towel under the container as an active sourdough starter may bubble over.

HOW TO KEEP YOUR SOURDOUGH STARTER HEALTHY

Keeping a sourdough starter is a little like caring for a pet or a child. They need the right conditions to thrive, you have to feed them daily (or weekly if refrigerated), and they can become less active if you neglect them.

I would say that it is almost impossible to kill a starter, given that scientists have managed to resurrect a sourdough starter using yeast cultures taken from Egyptian pottery, but it can become pretty grim if not given the correct care and attention it deserves.

THE RIGHT CONDITIONS FOR SOURDOUGH

Remember that sourdough needs a few things to thrive:

- Warm temperatures between 18°C and 29°C
- A space of several feet between the sourdough culture and any other culture (yogurt, kombucha, kefir, etc.)
- A non-reactive (glass or plastic) vessel and stirring spoon for storing and feeding
- A consistent food supply.

FEEDING YOUR STARTER

A note on ingredients: Non-chlorinated water is best for a sourdough culture as chlorine can interfere with the organisms in the starter. A freshly milled flour of the variety that your culture specifies is preferable.

A note on the flour-to-water ratio for feedings: When you feed your sourdough starter, feed it approximately equal weights of flour and water. You can measure the flour and water by weight with a kitchen scale or you can figure that for whatever method you use to measure you will simply use equal parts.

How frequently you feed your starter is dependent on how often you wish to bake with it: If you think you'll be using your starter every couple of days or even more frequently then you should feed it every day. If you will only be baking with it once a week then you may refrigerate it and feed and refresh it before baking as previously discussed.

Hydration Levels: You may come across the term "hydration level" when reading about sourdough and its starter. A hydration level, in the simplest of terms, just refers to the level of liquid in the sourdough starter as compared to the level of flour. You will have a 100% hydration level if you are creating a starter with equal weights of flour to water.

For the most part you shouldn't have to worry about the percentages of hydration in a recipe if you stick with the 100% hydration starter.

TAKING A BREAK - PROPER SOURDOUGH STORAGE

In reading about how to feed and care for a sourdough starter you might be thinking it is a twice-daily commitment for life. Rest assured that is far from the truth!

At one point or another you may need a break from feeding your sourdough culture. Perhaps you are taking the summer off bread-baking so as to not heat up the house. Perhaps you are moving and won't have the time. Perhaps you have a new baby and bread-baking is the last thing on your mind.

Whatever the case may be, there are options for short- and long-term storage of the sourdough culture. This can be done easily and your sourdough starter, if treated properly, should come back at least as strong as when you first started it.

Short Term Preservation

Perhaps you would just like to store your starter in the refrigerator for weeks or months at a time without using it for baking. It can be done, but there are a few things to keep in mind:

- Be sure that your starter is robust and at least 30 days old before you attempt longer refrigeration storage. The starter has to be vigorous to begin with in order to be vigorous after refrigeration.
- Gluten-free sourdough starters will not store as well as their gluten-containing counterparts.

- Lower the hydration level of your starter to around 65%. You can do this gradually by decreasing the amount of water that you feed the starter until for every ounce of flour in the starter you have .65 ounces of water. The low moisture content creates a more conducive storing state for the live organisms in your sourdough.
- Keep in mind that your starter will most likely double in volume in your refrigerator over time. So be sure not to overfill the container you are storing your sourdough in and make sure you don't create an airtight environment for the starter if you are using a glass jar with an airtight lid. The gases could build up enough in the jar to shatter it.
- You will still need to feed the starter if you plan to keep it in the refrigerator for more than a couple of months. Feeding and reviving the starter every 6 to 8 weeks is a good idea, and you can create some delicious loaves of bread every now and then if you still wish.
- When you wish to work with your starter again, plan on at least one extra feeding cycle to bring the sourdough out of hibernation.

Long Term Preservation

Maybe you will be spending months or years away from bread baking. Perhaps you want to send a friend some of your starter but they live across the country. Or perhaps you have a wonderful starter and you'd hate to lose it so you would like a little insurance.

As you have used a starter which has been dried, so you can also dry your own starter for later use. This is a very straight forward procedure.

To preserve your starter long-term

- Spread a bit of the fully active sourdough culture on a piece of parchment paper, a plate, or other clean flat surface.
- Once fully dried the starter should separate from the surface and can be removed.
- Crush or grind the now-dried sheet of sourdough.
- Store in an airtight container in a cool dry place. You could even store it in the freezer for extra insurance.

IN CONCLUSION GO FORTH AND MULTIPLY

To conclude, sourdough baking is a journey and we encourage you to really delve into this subject, practice and learn as much as you are able to. For that reason, we have set up a dedicated community of like-minded bakers which we encourage you to join.

Within our community, you can make new friends, take part in challenges, learn new recipes and diagnose any baking difficulties you may face.

Join Our Community

Additionally, through our website, you have available to you a growing list of locally sourced and crafted ingredients delivered to your door!

Shop Now

We have big plans for our small business and community. We hope you enjoy maintaining your starter and the bread-making journey you have now begun.

HAPPY BAKING!