



Sourdough Baking Guide



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Dear home baker,

Many of us have avoided sourdough for one reason or another. For many, it's the lack of consistent results from the oven. For others, it's because they think they don't like the taste of "sour" bread, and yet for others, it's because the thought of maintaining a sourdough starter that must be fed 2x per day (which is more than I'm willing to feed my cats, quite frankly) is simply too great a load to carry. I get it. In my sourdough quest that because over 10 years ago now, I have maintained and killed more sourdough starters than I can count. Even worse than that were the sourdough starters that survived but that smelt a bit off, looked a bit shabby in their crusted jars, and produced very mediocre results in the oven. Hardly enough of a payoff to warrant all that work.

All of my sourdough woes were averted when I spent time baking bread in Italy with Carla of Jovial Foods. Carla had spent the last years exploring a new way of maintaining a sourdough starter that forever changed the course of my kitchen. She called it keeping a "dry starter" though it's not completely dry... more like a thick Playdo. The starter isn't fed on a schedule, but rather, a small piece is fed before baking and then the whole starter is fed when there's only a small amount left - whether that is a few days or a few weeks or a few months. Don't worry - we'll get into that more inside this packet. My point is this: the dry starter method eliminates daily starter feeding, eliminates starter discard, and ensures your starter is always at prime activity level for baking consistent, beautiful bread.

This makes sourdough baking much more fool-proof for the home baker. What's there to be scared of?

Sourdough bakers are a bit like interpretive dancers - each of us with our favorite equipment, flours, techniques, and methods. You'll hardly find two bakers who do it exactly the same. Sourdough baking - "technical" as it may be - is truly an art form. One that we will work on perfecting and improving for our entire baking journey. Don't be deterred by a bad loaf - more of mine than I care to count have ended up going to the cow (she just so happens to love bread products).

I want this packet of information to encourage you. You're going to have success and failures and through that, you're going to find a way that you love to make bread! While I've given you general measurements and techniques, this is your dance. Before we begin, you need to loosen up. Sourdough baking should be fun. It should be enjoyable. It should bring you absolute delight. If you're off by some grams, so what. If your bread is a bit flat, so what! Keep baking and your loaves will keep improving. If you find joy in it, there's no end to the progress that can be made.

Let's get to baking!

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Shaye".

Definitions & Different Flours

Sourdough:

A fermented bread, made by utilizing wild yeast strains. Sourdough bread is alive with culture and because of the fermentation, much easier for the body to digest.

Sourdough Starter:

A small piece of uncooked dough that contains wild yeast strains. A piece of this dough is broken off and fed flour and water (called a levain) each time a baker would like to make a loaf of bread or other sourdough product. Sourdough starters are prized possessions of bakers and are often passed down generationally and shared with other bakers.

Feeding:

The process of taking a small piece of sourdough starter and adding a ratio of water and flour to the dough. This process gives the wild yeasts energy and food to consume, resulting in a healthy starter that is strong for baking! With the dry-starter method further discussed in this handout, a baker feeds their starter after 5 batches of levain have been made - when just a small amount of starter remains. The more a starter is used and fed, the healthier it will be.

Levain:

The first step in sourdough bread baking is to take a small piece of starter and combine it with flour and water. This mixture, like a thick pancake batter, is called a levain. The purpose of the levain is to activate the starter and give it a lot of food and energy for the baking ahead. Think of this step as a revving of the sourdough engine before the big baking race.

Hydration:

Different breads have different hydration levels. Simply put, hydration just refers to the amount of water versus flour in a bread. For example, a 1000 gram loaf that has 850 grams of water has an 85% hydration level. Bakers are constantly playing with hydration levels and each baker has their favorite percentage. The flour that you're using will have a dramatic impact on what hydration level you can obtain in a bread (don't stress about this, just know it varies).

Definitions & Different Flours

Stretching:

The stretching of sourdough bread occurs when the dough has been entirely mixed. After the flour has been given a rest period to absorb the water, the dough is stretched from all sides. This is done a few times with a small rest period between each stretching. Stretching can be skipped if you're in a rush - though you shouldn't expect the same end results. Stretching is very important for gluten development.

Fermentation:

The fermentation of sourdough bread baking refers to the stage in which the bread dough has been completely mixed and stretched and is transferred to a covered pot or container for 5-8 hours. In this fermentation period, that yeast will begin to produce lactic and acidic acid. This is important for the rise (read: bubbles!) and overall digestibility of the bread.

Gluten:

A general name given to certain proteins in wheat that act as a glue, holding bread together.

Bread flour:

Bread flour is a hybrid wheat that has been created for high gluten levels. Those with gluten sensitivity should avoid bread flour and opt for a more easily digestible wheat, such as einkorn. Because of bread flour's high gluten level and low protein level, it creates a soft pillow-like dough that is very easy to manage. Bread flour lends itself well to high-hydration loaves.

Heirloom flours:

There are a lot of old wheat varieties out there - most popularly, einkorn, emmer, kamut, and spelt. These are wheats that have never been hybridized for gluten development. They have higher protein levels, higher nutrients and weaker gluten. Because of this, bread made with heirloom flours will require a lower hydration level (I bake my einkorn loaves with 50% hydration) and will not rise as much as breads made with bread flour. Heirloom flours tend to have exceptional flavor profiles, each unique to the wheat variety.

What Affects Your Sourdough

Climate of your home:

Sourdough baking isn't the same year round. When our kitchens are warm in summer, bread dough rises quickly. When they're slightly colder in winter, breads tend to rise slower. The climate of our bread rising can sometimes be manipulated by placing our fermenting dough in a gently warmed oven, next to a wood stove, or in a draft-free part of the kitchen in winter or alternatively, in the summer, placed where it will rise a bit cooler and slower.

What flour you use:

As briefly touched on in the definitions portion of this handout, the type of flour you use will drastically impact your sourdough bread result because of their varying gluten strength and protein levels. This is important to understand so that you don't live in constant angst about how your loaves turn out. An einkorn loaf will taste and look a lot different than a bread flour loaf. Find what flour you love to bake with (and eat!) and start there.

What water you use:

Filtered water is really crucial. Most tap water contains chlorine which can kill the good bacteria present needed to make your sourdough delicious. I keep a Berkey filter in my kitchen, at room temperature, and use that for bread baking. If you do not have a filter, leave your water out overnight uncovered so that the chlorine can evaporate.

How healthy your starter is:

The more you bake sourdough, the healthier your starter will become. In fact, each time you bake with sourdough your populating your kitchen with more wild yeast. This is a good thing and will benefit your starter. Young starters are a bit more fragile and can take some time to develop - give breads made with young starter a bit more time to rise. Be kind to your starter. Take care of it. (I talk to mine and encourage it often). If your struggling and your friend has a strong starter, ask for a piece! Sourdough bakers are happy to share.

What Affects Your Sourdough

Fermentation time:

One of the greatest variables in sourdough bread is the amount of time you let the final mixed dough ferment. Fermentation is what gives the bread flavor, structure, and taste. An under-fermented dough will be dense and flavorless whereas an over-fermented dough will be slack and potentially too sour. Finding the perfect fermentation time will depend on the temperature of your kitchen and the flour used in your bread making. As a general rule, a fingertip pressed into the dough should spring back a bit when the dough is ready. I aim for a 40-50% increase in the size of the dough.

Shaping techniques:

How you shape your final dough for baking after fermentation will affect the overall spring, density, and shape of loaf after it's baked. Banneton baskets are often used to help the loaf hold its shape before baking. For high-hydration doughs, the best shaping technique is dumping the dough onto a work surface and using a bench scraper to simply pull the dough towards you a dozen times to create surface tension. [Here's a helpful video on that.](#) For heirloom flours, such as einkorn, dump the dough onto a work surface. Stretch it out slightly with your fingertips before grabbing a piece of edging and bringing it to the middle, pressing it down gently. Repeat with all of the edging. Flip the loaf over and twist the loaf with your hands, gently pushing in, a dozen times to create surface tension. [More on that here.](#)

Cooking methods & temperatures:

Again, there are a lot of techniques here and many variables, such as your oven. A Dutch oven has produced the most consistent results for me and many other bakers, as it holds the steam in which allows the bread to rise to its fullest potential. Some bakers like to start the oven a bit lower for the first half of baking before cranking it up as high as it will go for the second half. Other bakers like to preheat the oven, shut it off completely when they first put the loaf in, and then crank it for the second half of baking. Play with various techniques to see what gives you the best result - knowing that you have a lot of options to find what works for you. I've detailed my methods in the recipes at the back of this packet.

What You'll Need/Materials



1. Scale
2. Good flour
3. Good salt
4. Fermentation container/covered
5. Bread Lame or Sharp knife
6. Dutch oven (helpful, not required)
7. Filtered/non-chlorinated water
8. Banneton basket
9. Bench scraper



Sourdough Starter

(Starting/Maintaining)

Note that this entire section can be omitted if you have a friend with a sourdough starter. Simply grab a small piece from them to begin! Likewise, if you have a local health food store, you can often find sourdough starters (mostly dehydrated that you simply add water to) available there as well. If neither of these are an option for you, here's how to capture some wild yeast and start baking from your own starter. I keep an einkorn starter because I have found it produces the best flavor.

Sourdough Starter

(Starting/Maintaining)

Day One:

- 45 grams filtered water
- 60 grams all-purpose einkorn flour (or flour of choice)

Mix the water and flour together. Flour your hands and gently work the dough together in your hands (this will help to capture yeast!). Put the dough in a glass jar with a lid and set aside in an ambient kitchen for 2 days.



Day Three:

- 30 grams filtered water
- 60 grams all-purpose einkorn flour (or flour of choice)

Remove the lid from your starter. Use a fork to scrape away the light-grey surface that has likely appeared. Use your fork to gather up the remaining starter and transfer it to a clean bowl. Add the 30 grams filtered water and mix to combine. Then add the 60 grams of flour and mix. Again, dust your hands slightly with flour and gather the dough up in your hands, working it gently until it's smooth. Transfer to a clean glass jar with a lid and set aside for 24 hours.

Day Four:

Repeat the process from day three.

Day Five:

Repeat the process from day four.





Day Six:

- 20 grams of starter
(the rest can be thrown away - don't worry, this is the only time we'll ever do that!)
- 50 grams filtered water
- 100 grams flour

Combine the starter and filtered water in a small bowl. Use a wooden spoon to combine well. Add in the flour and mix. Again, dust your hands slightly with flour and gather the dough up in your hands, working it gently until it's smooth. Transfer to a clean glass jar with a lid and set aside for 12 hours at room temperature before transferring to the refrigerator for final storage.

Congratulations!

You've done it! Your starter is now created. It should have the smell of a pleasant yogurt.

A Few Tips

- Be careful how many antibacterial products you use in your kitchen. This will unintentionally kill a lot of the beneficial bacteria and wild yeast needed to make really good sourdough.
- Your sourdough starter will get stronger over time. Keep baking and watch it grow in activity! I would recommend feeding your starter (recipe in the following section) at least 5 times before baking.
- When your starter is new, you'll need to double the rising times. So if the recipe calls for a 3 hour fermentation, you'll get much better results from 6.
- If you need to take a break from baking, this starter can easily be frozen.



Maintaining

Ever since I learned to utilize a “stiff” or “dry” sourdough starter from Carla at Jovial Foods, I’ve become a dry-starter-sourdough-evangelist. I bake almost every day with my sourdough starter, but I only feed it once a week. Let’s talk about that!

Instead of keeping a large jar of wet-starter that needs to be constantly fed (most wet-starters are kept at 1:1 flour/water ratio), I advocate instead for keeping your starter at a 2:1 flour/water ratio.

To Feed Your Starter

- 10-20 grams of remaining starter
- 50 grams filtered water
- 100 grams flour

1. Combine all ingredients
2. Use a wooden spoon to combine.
3. Transfer the starter to a lightly floured surface and knead until smooth and well combined.
4. Transfer to a container with a lid and let it hang at room temperature for a few hours (up to 24 is totally fine) before transferring to the refrigerator.

A Few Tips

- This fed starter makes enough sourdough starter for 5 levain batches - read: five loaves of bread! - (recipe on page 14) with enough left over to feed and start again.
- This is the ratio of flour (2:1) you will always feed your starter.
- Never use all of your starter! Always save a small piece (at least 10 grams) to feed.

Levain

Levain is the first step in baking bread. It's stage one of sourdough. The place where all sourdough recipes will begin. If you're making pancakes, english muffins, bakes, bread, waffles, or most anything: it all begins with making a levain. This levain batch is equal to 250 grams of active sourdough starter, which can be subbed into any sourdough recipe you find.

To Make A Batch of Levain:

1. Remove sourdough starter from refrigerator
2. Add 30 grams of sourdough starter into a bowl
3. Add 130 grams of filtered water into the bowl and use a wooden spoon to roughly combine
4. Add 120 grams of flour into the bowl and combine with the wooden spoon
5. Cover and let sit for 2-3 hours, until bubbly and active



*The levain can be made anywhere from 2-16 hours before you want to bake something. If you forget your levain on the counter overnight, it's okay. Its ability to raise your bread will decrease slightly over the hours, but it will still work.



BASIC HIGH-HYDRATION LOAF

INGREDIENTS

For the Levain

- 30 grams sourdough starter
- 50 grams warm water
- 50 grams bread flour

For the final dough

- ⁴⁸⁰ 600 grams warm water
- 600 grams bread flour
- 2 teaspoons salt

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Combine the levain ingredients together in a large non-metallic bowl. Use a wooden spoon to combine until smooth. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and set aside in a draft-free, warm place for 4-10 hours (up to 24 is fine) until bubbles begin to appear on the surface.
2. To the levain, add in the final dough ingredients. Use a wooden spoon or stiff spatula to combine very well. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap again and set aside for 15 minutes to 1 hour to allow the flour to hydrate.
3. Dump the bowl contents onto a gently floured cutting board or countertop. Use a dough scraper to fold the dough over itself from each side. Place the bowl upside down over the dough and let it rest for another 15 minutes.
4. Repeat the folding process again. Again, place the bowl upside down over the dough and let it rest another 15 minutes. Repeat the folding process 2 more times.
5. After the final folding, transfer the dough back into the bowl, cover tightly with plastic wrap, and set aside for 3-6 hours to proof. The dough should increase in size by about 30%.
6. Transfer the dough to a smooth work surface. Use a dough scraper to pull the dough towards you a dozen times to create surface tension. [Here's a helpful video on that.](#) Transfer the shaped loaf to a heavily floured banneton basket (or 8" bowl with a heavily floured linen towel), seam side up, and cover with a lid or plastic wrap.
7. Refrigerate the dough for at least 1 hour. This will help it to hold its shape. Up to 24 hours is fine.
8. When you're ready to bake, preheat a Dutch oven, with a lid, in a 425 degree.
9. Remove the Dutch oven from the hot oven. Remove the lid. Carefully flip the proofing basket into the Dutch oven to transfer the bread in. Score the bread with a razor blade or sharp knife which will allow the steam an escape route. Replace the lid and bake for 30 minutes.
10. Remove the lid, increase the oven temperature to 475 degrees, and bake for an additional 20 minutes until the bread is deeply golden and sounds hollow when tapped.
11. Remove the Dutch oven from the oven and remove the bread to a wire cooling rack. Let cool for at least 1 hour before slicing.

NOTES



BASIC EINKORN LOAF

INGREDIENTS

For the Levain

- 30 grams sourdough starter
- 130 grams warm water
- 120 grams all-purpose einkorn flour

For the final dough

- ³⁰⁰ 600 grams warm water
- 600 grams all-purpose einkorn flour
- 2 teaspoons salt

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Combine the levain ingredients together in a large non-metallic bowl. Use a wooden spoon to combine until smooth. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and set aside in a draft-free, warm place for 4-10 hours (up to 24 is fine) until bubbles begin to appear on the surface.
2. To the levain, add in the final dough ingredients. Use a wooden spoon or stiff spatula to combine very well. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap again and set aside for 15 minutes to 1 hour to allow the flour to hydrate.
3. Dump the bowl contents onto a gently floured cutting board or countertop. Use a dough scraper to fold the dough over itself from each side. Place the bowl upside down over the dough and let it rest for another 15 minutes.
4. Repeat the folding process again. Again, place the bowl upside down over the dough and let it rest another 15 minutes. Repeat the folding process 2 more times.
5. After the final folding, transfer the dough back into the bowl, cover tightly with plastic wrap, and set aside for 3-6 hours to proof. The dough should increase in size by about 30%.
6. Preheat a Dutch oven, with a lid, in a 425 degree oven.
7. While the oven is preheating, use a bowl scraper (or mason jar lid) to scrape the proofed dough onto a gently floured cutting board. Gently shape the dough by grabbing the edges of the dough and pressing them back into the center with your fingertips. Flip the dough over (seam side down) and use your hands to shape the dough into a smooth, round ball by twisting it in one direction a dozen times. This will seal the seam on the bottom and create surface tension on the top.
8. Transfer the loaf to a heavily floured proofing basket (or 8" bowl with a heavily floured linen towel) - seam side up. Cover the basket with plastic wrap and let proof at room temperature for 1 hour while the oven continues to preheat.
9. When you're ready to bake the bread, remove the Dutch oven from the hot oven. Remove the lid. Carefully flip the proofing basket into the Dutch oven to transfer the bread in. Score the bread with a razor blade or sharp knife which will allow the steam an escape route. Replace the lid and bake for 30 minutes.
10. Remove the lid, increase the oven temperature to 475 degrees, and bake for an additional 20 minutes until the bread is deeply golden and sounds hollow when tapped.
11. Remove the Dutch oven from the oven and remove the bread to a wire cooling rack. Let cool for at least 1 hour before slicing.

NOTES



Sourdough is just the beginning.
My philosophy for all cooking is that it
should be delicious, easy to prepare,
nutrient-rich, and budget friendly.

I created the The Elliott Homestead
Cooking Community for one simple reason

...

I want to share my kitchen with you.

My goal was to create exceptionally
pleasurable recipes to enjoy and teach you
how to make them in your own kitchen.

Then, I wanted to build a simple and
empowering community where cooks like
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