

Care and Feeding of Your Sourdough

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Congratulations!

It's a beautiful day when a new sourdough starter is spawned! Baking our own bread is delicious, nutritious, cheap, fun, and helps us take back control over what we eat from the industrial food system.

Your sourdough is the child of Rocky, who has been living in my fridge, first in Thornbury then in Ballarat, since 2012. Rocky came from Mildred, who lived with Maia in Brunswick, and from a starter called George before that.

My starter's name is:

How to store your starter

Your starter can be stored at room temperature on your kitchen counter, or in the fridge. The warmer the temperature, the more often you need to feed it. A healthy feeding schedule is every 12-24 hours at room temperature, or every 1-2 weeks in the fridge.

Put your starter in a largish container that will allow it to double in size. Plastic is probably not a great idea as it may leach. I like to use one of those glass jars with a flippy lid. I remove the rubber gasket so that there is a little room for air to move; if you use another kind of lid, make sure you put it on loosely and/or pop the lid to let it breathe every so often, otherwise the gases produced by your sourdough may pressurise the container and give you a messy surprise when you open it.

How to feed your starter

Feed your starter with equal quantities (by weight) of flour and water. For instance, 100g of flour and 100mL of water. (Of course, 100mL of water weights 100g.) If you can't be bothered measuring by weight, water is about half as heavy as flour. Therefore you can feed your starter half a cup of water and one cup of flour, or any other quantity in those proportions.

Flour: ideally, use a wholegrain/organic/stoneground/hippie style flour, as it has more nutrients for your starter and yourself. You can change flours by gradually introducing another kind over the course of a few feeds.

My starter has most recently been fed:

Water: use unchlorinated water, as chlorine may kill the beneficial yeast and bacteria that live in your sourdough. If you are on town water, you can let it sit for a while, boil it, or use a good filter to remove chlorine. You may find your starter works OK with chlorinated water, in which case go for it.

My starter has most recently had this kind of water:

After adding the flour and water, give it a good mix and let it feed and grow for approximately 12-24 hours (depending on the ambient temperature). It is done when it has roughly doubled in volume and is bubbly.

How to make sourdough bread - my easy method

1. In a large bowl mix together starter, water and flour in the ratios 1:2:3 by weight. To make an approx. 1kg loaf (which is a fairly standard size) use 160g starter, 320mL water, 480g flour. Also add 1 tsp salt.
2. Use your hands to mix it thoroughly until it forms a large ball. Cover the bowl with something to stop it drying out (I use a reusable silicone bowl lid, but you could use a damp tea towel or a dinner plate) and allow to rest for 12-24 hours until doubled in size again.
3. Lightly flour a work surface. Turn your dough out onto the surface and lightly knead it (turning and pushing at it a few times) to push out some of the gases. Five minutes max - sourdough needs much less kneading than regular bread, because of the long fermentation periods.
4. Form a loaf shape, thoroughly flour all its surfaces, and put it in a loaf tin.

5. Allow to rest, covered, for a few more hours to rise again (may take 2 to 12 hours depending on ambient temperature).
6. Heat your domestic oven as hot as it goes - mine goes to 250C but hotter would be fine too.
7. Bake for approx 30 mins or until golden on the outside and the bottom sounds hollow when rapped with your knuckles.

A sample schedule for weekend baking in winter

- Thursday evening: remove starter from fridge and feed, then leave for 24 hours in a coolish part of the house (for me this is the unheated kitchen)
- Friday evening: make dough and leave to rise overnight some warmer (in my house, the living room) for 12 hours
- Saturday morning: form loaf
- Saturday afternoon/evening (depending on warmth): bake loaf

Shorter timescales for warmer weather

- Friday morning: feed starter, leave 12 hours
- Friday evening: make dough, leave somewhere cool overnight
- Saturday morning: form loaf
- Saturday lunchtime: bake loaf

Tips for better sourdough bread

Although I'm no expert, here are some tips and tricks I've picked up to make bread that's a little fancier and more like the gorgeous artisanal loaves you see all over Instagram.

Wetter dough: add more water to make the dough wetter. It will be harder to handle but the texture will be better, with bigger bubbles. Start out by adding just 50mL of water to each batch until you get to the limit of what you can handle.

Autolyse: a fancy word meaning you mix the flour and water together first, then let them rest for about an hour before adding the starter and salt. This helps with gluten formation and will make a better bread texture.

Folding: before forming the loaf shape, repeatedly fold the dough about 6 times, every 30 minutes, to help form a gluten skin to help it retain its shape. This is especially useful if you aren't using a tin.

Bannetons, baskets, and couches: instead of using a tin you can use various tools to help the loaf rise in a certain shape, then turn it out to make a rustic, more naturally shaped loaf. You can buy these online or in specialty baking stores.

Loaf shaping: watch some Youtube videos for how to form batards, boules, baguettes and other shapes (not all starting with B).

Slashing: get a lame (special baker's razor) or very sharp knife and slash your bread to help it expand in the oven.

Steam: steam in your oven will help form a better crust. You can put a pan of water in the bottom of the oven or use a mister. The "no knead" method using a preheated cast iron pot is an extreme way of keeping steam in around the loaf.

For more information about any of these techniques, look on Youtube or search for the topic on <http://thefreshloaf.com> which is an amazing baking forum.

Adding flavour

Try any of the following to modify the flavour and texture of your loaf. You can't go too far wrong!

- A variety of flours, eg. spelt, rye, etc
- Milk, yoghurt, or whey to replace part or all of the water
- Olive oil or melted butter
- Eggs or egg yolks
- Seeds on top or mixed through - oats, sunflower seeds, flax, sesame, poppy, pumpkin seeds, etc
- Chopped herbs, finely diced onion or garlic, or spices mixed through the dough
- Cheese mixed through the dough or sprinkled on top
- Olives
- Up to 1 cup mashed pumpkin, potato, or other starchy vegetable
- Up to 1 cup soaked, sprouted, or cooked leftover grains such as rice, quinoa, oats, barley, bulgur, etc
- Grated apple, mashed banana, or other fruits
- Dried fruit and nuts
- A couple of spoonfuls of cocoa powder
- Orange or lemon zest

- Honey, molasses, brown sugar
- Milk or egg yolk glaze
- Sticky icing (especially for sweet fruit breads)

Try combinations like:

- rye flour, molasses, a little unsweetened cocoa and caraway seeds (for a dark rye style)
- mashed pumpkin, rosemary, and parmesan
- orange zest, orange juice, mixed dried fruit and nuts, and allspice
- grated apple, walnut and cinnamon
- olive oil, olives, and caramelised onion
- flatbreads made with yoghurt and nigella seed (kalonji)

Out of bread? Don't have two days to spare?

Flatbreads: instead of forming a loaf and waiting for a second rise, tear your dough into tennis-ball sized chunks and roll them flat, then cook on a very hot grill or large cast iron pan. (Wipe the pan with a wet cloth between flatbreads to remove burnt flour, which will accumulate otherwise.) Great with hummus, labneh, salads, grilled meat or veg. You can even make them on the barbie!

Sourdough veggie fritters: mix 1 cup risen starter, 1-2 eggs, and whatever veggies and flavourings you like. Try zucchini and feta, leftover pumpkin and spicy chutney, chopped kimchi and greens, or whatever you like. You want a batter that can be dolloped into the pan, so if it's too runny add extra flour. Fry ladlefuls in a little oil and enjoy for brunch, lunch, or a light dinner.

Sourdough pancakes: 1 cup risen starter, 1 cup flour, 1 cup milk, 1 egg, 1 tablespoon caster sugar, 1/2 tsp baking soda, and a pinch of salt. Mashed bananas or fresh blueberries make good additions. Makes thick American-style pancakes.

Health and wellbeing of your starter

Sometimes a starter will get a little funky and unwell, especially if you don't feed it for a while. That's OK - it happens to everyone. Some common things you don't need to worry about:

- liquid on top of the starter (called "hooch") - just mix it in or pour it off
- a little bit of fuzzy mold - just scrape it off

Occasionally my starter gets what seems like a systemic infection, and because yours comes from mine, yours might too. You'll know it's happening if it starts to smell kind of like eggy farts, especially in the later stages of the dough rising.

According to my research this is caused by a bacteria called *Leuconostoc*, which is commonly present in sourdough and other lacto-fermented foods, but which sometimes gets out of balance. *Leuconostoc* is a bit like yeast in that it eats sugars/starches and gives off a gas, but while yeast emit odourless carbon dioxide, *Leuconostoc* emit rotten egg stinky gas. Eww!

The good news is that the smell goes away instantly on baking. Your bread will be fine to eat and if you don't tell anyone, they probably won't notice.

You will most likely want to get things back into balance, though. Here's what I have found helps.

- If you're using an industrial sort of flour (like supermarket white flour) without many natural yeasts, switch to a more natural, less processed one. Something like organic wholemeal flour would probably be good.
- Feed the starter more frequently. Mine was usually kept in the fridge for a week at a time, but I switched to feeding it every 12 hours for a while and it helped it immensely. I used the excess starter for lots of fritters and pancakes and, I admit, I composted a bit too.
- Keep it a little dryer than usual. *Leuconostoc* seems to thrive in wetter starters, so use a slightly lower proportion of water for a while.
- Aerate your starter well. Yeast likes air more than *Leuconostoc* does, so if you mix the starter regularly (a few times a day or whenever you walk past it on the kitchen bench) you will allow the yeast to thrive and make the *Leuconostoc* disappear.

Your sourdough is a living entity, a symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast, that can live indefinitely if it is fed nutritious food, clean water, and tended with loving care. I hope you enjoy having it as a new member of your family!

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Resilient Living in Regional Victoria

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