

Sourdough starter care guide

Sourdough bread has become all the rage in recent years amongst the homesteading community, and beyond and while I myself just jumped on the trend about 5 years ago, the practice of making bread with a sourdough starter has been around for thousands of years.

If you're not familiar, sourdough bread is bread that is proofed with a fermented starter culture that consists of bread and water. The natural bacterias and yeasts in the starter allow the bread to rise without the use of commercial yeast.

Many people procure sourdough starters from a friend, or even order them online. Some people have starters that have been passed down for generations and are many years old. Sourdough starters are living thing, so they do require some care to survive but it's not as hard as it may seem.

If you don't want to order a sourdough starter online, or you don't know someone who has a starter to share, you can make your own, although this can be a little tricky.

If you are interested in making your own sourdough starter, start by mixing together equal parts of flour and water by weight, 100 grams is good to start with, then mix until a paste forms. Cover your starter loosely with a towel or a lid (not screwed on) and leave it out at room temperature. If it's cold out, you may want to leave your starter in the oven (without turning it on) to help encourage faster rising.

The next day feed your sourdough starter again, equal parts water and flour by weight, this time 50 grams instead of a 100. Leave it covered for another day.

On day three you'll feed your starter the same amount, 50 grams of water, and 50 grams of flour but this time you'll

discard half of your starter prior to feeding, so you don't end up with too much starter.

Repeat this process of discarding and feeding everyday for a week at least, or until your starter begins to form bubbles and doubles in size in between feedings. In certain climates this can take more than two weeks.

I did not have much luck trying to make my own sourdough starter recently but it was the dead of winter in Michigan and I think it may have been too cold for my starter to survive, and grow. So, on the quest to find an active sourdough starter I set out on Facebook market place to find someone local in the area who had an active sourdough starter they were willing to share.

I found one, and we've been going strong ever since. I've had several sourdough starters in the past, some stronger than others but I've always unfortunately killed them for some reason or another.

This is probably the longest I've kept one alive, and she is thriving! I've even been fortunate enough to share some of my starter with some of my friends and family- the inspiration for this article.

So you've acquired a sourdough starter, how do you keep your sourdough alive?

Your sourdough needs to be fed regularly to stay alive and active. Your frequency of feedings depends on how often you bake, and where you keep your starter. If you bake every day or every other day, you will probably want to keep your start out at room temperature. If you only bake once a week or even less, you can keep your sourdough starter in the fridge. This will allow you to go more time between feedings. You can keep your starter in the fridge for several weeks without feeding and it will still survive. Your starter will be its most active bubbly self at room temperature, so when you are

planning to bake, plan ahead by pulling your starter out of the fridge and feeding it 12 hours before you bake (times may vary depending on the season and how hot is. You may only need 6 hours in the summer, and maybe more in the winter)

Typically when you feed your sourdough you'll want to discard any excess starter prior to feeding. You can compost this extra starter or you can save it in a separate jar and use it to make sourdough "discard" recipes. Sourdough discard is inactive sourdough starter so it doesn't provide the same kind of rise as a regular sourdough starter, because it's inactive it also doesn't break down the gluten the same way your regular starter will, but you can still make some great stuff with it. However, if you don't want to waste, or you worry about not being able to use up a whole jar of discard you can eliminate this step with a little strategic planning in your feeding.

You can save just enough sourdough starter in-between baking to be able to refeed your starter so that it grows enough to bake just what you need. I tend to save between 1/4-1/2 cup of sourdough starter after baking each week, and then it goes back in the fridge. When I pull it out to feed it the next week I feed it equal parts water and flour and the quantity of starter that this produces for me is just enough to bake what I need while still saving enough leftover to be fed the next week. This way I use just what I need and I don't have an excess sourdough starter that has to be thrown out each week, and my jar isn't overflowing with starter either.

It may take time to figure out the perfect baking formula for you, but it's worth the experimentation.

When it's time to feed your sourdough starter, you'll need unbleached, unenriched flour, and tepid or slightly warm filtered water (I like to use warm water in the winter)

I like to use a kitchen scale, and a kitchen scale is the most

tried and true method by most bakers, but if you don't have a kitchen scale you can use measuring cups. I have done both.

Weigh or measure out your sourdough starter, if you are discarding some do that first and then weigh out and add it to a jar, bowl, cup, whatever container you like to store your starter in, (I use mason jars)

Then weigh out equal parts water, and equal parts flour. Mix until combined. You should have a thick paste like texture, like thick pancake batter. If you are measuring rather than weighing, you can use equal parts but you may find your sourdough starter is runny. If this is this case just add more flour. Leave your jar loosely covered (don't seal it) for 12 hours, or into roughly doubled in size, with large bubbles. Then your starter is ready to bake with!

How do I know when my sourdough starter is ready to be fed?

Your sourdough starter should be at its peak after feeding before you bake with it. Large air bubbles, doubled in size. It will be thick in texture with lots of air bubbles, and when you tilt your jar from one side to another it may appear stringy. This is a very active starter.

A starter that is past its peak after feeding will be deflated, and look thin like pancake batter. This doesn't mean your starter is necessarily hungry, it just means it's not at its peak for baking.

When your sourdough starter is hungry you will develop a darkish layer of liquid on the top of your starter. This is called hooch, and it's produced by the wild yeast in the starter. If this has happened don't worry! Your sourdough starter is going to be fine. In the fridge your starter can last quite awhile after this point before a feeding, however if your starter is at room temperature, it needs to be fed soon to prevent mold from growing on top. Once mold grows on top it is nearly impossible to get it to stop, and your

starter needs to be tossed out.

If you have a layer of hooch on your starter you can either pour it off, or mix it into your starter before feeding. It can make your sourdough starter even more sour and add a more complex flavor to your bread.

What kind of flour should I feed my starter?

There are a ton of different flour brands out there and different options for feeding your starter. The most basic things I look for in a flour are unenriched and unbleached. Enriched and bleached flour is so devoid of natural bacteria and microbes that there really isn't much of anything for your starter to feed off of.

Organic flour is better if you can afford it, but not necessary. My favorite brands for regular flour (both organic and non organic) are King Arthur and Bob's Mills.

Now, if you really want to get into the nitty gritty you may know that our white flour that we bake with is not what flour used to be. The modern wheat crop has been so modified throughout the last several decades that it no longer resembles ancient wheat. So if you're truly looking for the healthiest bread one can eat, with the best beneficial bacteria and the easiest digestibility, you may want to consider ancient grain flours.

Spelt and einkorn flour are two of the most popular flours for this purpose. Ancient grain flour is more expensive than regular flour and it does not bake quite the same way. The gluten content in these ancient flours is lower than your modern flour. This produces a less stretchy and elastic dough, as well as a less airy crumb and texture in the bread itself. It's quite hearty and can be an acquired taste to some, but it actually has a very nutty flavor and a nice depth to it.

This is not for everyone, it's not the most affordable option,

and if you're new to baking these flours take some time to get use to. They're not your grandmas flours (they're your great, great grandmas flours) but if health is of the highest priority, ancient grain flours are the way to go.

What kind of tools do I need to get started with my bread baking?

It's very easy to get caught up in not thinking that you have the right equipment to do the job when in reality, you don't need all the equipment instagram sourdough influences have. In fact, I've even brought my sourdough starter on vacation with me and baked bread in an airbnb without any of my regular equipment. So what do you *really* need to bake a loaf of bread?

Measuring cups, mixing bowls, an oven safe pan and potentially an oven safe casserole dish (if your oven safe pan is not a dutch oven)

The easiest thing to bake your sourdough bread in is a dutch oven. Dutch ovens are deep and trap the steam in the with lid on them which creates air bubbles, and a soft chewy inside during the initial baking process. However, if you don't have a dutch oven, you can achieve this in other ways. My favorite way to do this at home is to bake my bread in a regular cast iron pan (or oven safe pan) and add a stainless steel mixing bowl on top to act as a lid, and trap in steam. This works great for me and is even easier than a dutch oven in some ways because it's easier to drop my bread in my shallow cast iron pan, than in the dutch oven. If you're going to use this method, make sure you're using stainless steel bowls, or something that is oven safe.

The other way to bake bread is to add a tray of water on the oven shelf below your bread. This will also create steam for the bread. After 30 minutes of baking, remove the tray of water, just as you would your dutch oven lid, so the crust has

a chance to become crispy.

Dehydrating your sourdough starter

If you've been gifted a sourdough starter from someone, or acquired it through some other way and you're worried about killing it, this is how to preserve a little bit of your starter in case of an emergency.

Take your active starter and spread a thin layer over parchment paper or silicone baking mats, or a dehydrator tray. If you're Using your oven, set it to the lowest temp you can and leave your starter in there until it's completely dry. Alternatively, if you have a dehydrator, you can use that. I set mine to around 145 degrees.

Make SURE your starter is completely dry before storing. You can break it up into little pieces or even blend into a powder in a blender or food processor. Your starter will keep indefinitely and should something happen to your active starter, you can rehydrate this and have another active starter. It takes between 3-5 days of regular feedings before your starter is back to normal.

Making your sourdough bread

So your starter is active and bubbly, it's doubled in size and you're finally ready to bake your first loaf of bread.

Honestly, in my opinion, this is the easy part. There are hundreds of different recipes on the internet for how to make a loaf of sourdough. Bakers more skilled than myself have experimented to find the perfect amount of salt, flour and water for their particular kitchen setting. You could pick any one of them and probably have success if you follow the instructions, and have an active starter.

This is the recipe I've been following over the last few months: [Homemade Sourdough bread](#)

If I'm using all ancient grain flour, sometimes I adjust it depending on how the dough is behaving but the reason there are so many different recipes is because everyone's sourdough starter, and kitchen climate are going to be different. A very old sourdough starter in a very warm climate may not need nearly as much time to rise and develop as a newer starter in a colder climate. For this reason you may even have to adjust your recipes based on season.

I've been baking sourdough bread for five years and really only got consistent (and consistently good) within the last year. It's not necessarily hard, but it does take time to learn what methods work best for you.

Making homemade bread that is free of all the preservatives, fillers, and nonsense in conventional grocery store bread, and not having to pay an arm and a leg for it, like you would at the farmers market, is a great way to begin taking steps towards a healthier lifestyle for your family.