



Starting A Starter

Last week my sourdough starter accidentally ended up in the freezer and I wasn't able to resurrect it. No one has fessed up to this heinous act - yet. Thankfully, growing your own starter doesn't require 100 years or anything complex. A new start can be grown in about 5 days. Since I have been getting a lot of question on sour dough I thought this would be the perfect time to start from ground zero and teach the basics of starting a sourdough start.

Sourdough is the first form of bread and is by far the healthiest, tastiest, and has the best texture. Sourdough doesn't use commercial yeast, but rather wild yeast. This wild yeast is found everywhere and on every surface. Sourdough start is just the medium that is used to capture this wild yeast. The cool thing about sourdough is that it unique to every environment that it grows in. The sourdough you taste in San Francisco will taste different to the sourdough you will taste in Eastern Europe. The reason for this is the many different wild yeasts and varying climates determine the flavor and texture of the loaf. Almost every corner of the earth has a form of sourdough bread entirely unique to that area.

Bread, especially for those folks with gluten sensitivities, has been frowned upon and there are multiple reasons for that. Most wheat raised in the U.S. has been

engineered to high gluten. The crazy thing about this is that traditional wheat generally has only 3 gluten proteins, but here in the U.S., we have grown our wheat to have anywhere from 90-98 gluten proteins - most of which haven't even been identified! So wheat really isn't the criminal, it is this zombie wheat that has come out of the lab that is the problem. If you make any kind of yeast bread or sourdough, try to get your hands on an heirloom or ancient wheat.

What most folks don't know about sourdough is that it's a fermented food! The major question that I get when I mention this is "what happens to the live cultures after you bake them?". Anyone who knows anything about ferments knows that heat kills the cultures, so this is a good question. The magic with the cultures in sourdough happens not in the final loaf, but during the 18 hours it takes to rise. During the rising period the sourdough cultures feed on the gluten and pre-digest them! So by the time that slice of bread even touches your lips, those cultures have already broken down the gluten in the flour so that your tummy doesn't have to do all the hard work to digest the gluten! Incredible! This is the reason that sourdough is so much better for you than commercial yeast bread.

Making a sourdough start is simply two ingredients and time. Five days to be exact. Let's get going...

Day 1

3/4 cups flour
1/2-cup water
Non-reactive bowl (preferably ceramic)

Pour both ingredients into the bowl and stir until smooth. Loosely cover the bowl with plastic wrap and place the bowl in a room that keeps a steady temperature of 70° - 75° F. Let it sit for 24 hours.

Day 2

3/4 cup and 2 Tablespoons flour
1/2-cup water

On day two you may notice some small bubbles

appear. This is good! Bubbles are a sign that wild yeast has taken up residency and is feeding on the sugar present in the flour and releasing carbon dioxide and alcohol. You may notice a vinegary smell - this is also good. This is the yeast creating an acidic environment, which makes it hard (almost impossible) for bad bacteria to form.

Simply add in the flour and water to your start. Mix well until it is smooth and free of lumps. It should resemble the texture of toothpaste. Loosely cover the bowl and let it sit for 24 hours at a constant temperature of 70° - 75° F.

Day 3

3/4 cup and 2 Tablespoons flour
1/2-cup water

On day three you should notice that the whole surface of the sourdough start is dotted with bubbles. It should also look larger in volume. When you stir the start a popping sound should be present. The start should have a much stronger vinegary smell.

Simply add in the flour and water to your start. Mix well until it is smooth and free of lumps. It should resemble the texture of toothpaste. Loosely cover the bowl and let it sit for 24 hours at a constant temperature of 70° - 75° F.

Day 4

3/4 cup and 2 Tablespoons flour
1/2-cup water

On day four you should notice the same bubbles covering the whole surface. The most noticeable difference should be some larger bubbles. Also the start should be thinner than day's prior. The aroma should smell very sour and pungent. If you are so inclined, taste the start - it should taste vinegary.

Simply add in the flour and water to your start. Mix well until it is smooth and free of lumps. It should resemble the texture of toothpaste. Loosely cover the bowl and let it sit for 24 hours at a constant temperature of 70° - 75° F.

Day 5

On day five your start should be double in size and should be very bubbly - almost frothy! When you stir the start it should feel and look almost web like. It should be thin in consistency and have a very sour smell. If you have all of these attributes, your start is ready to be used.

Maintaining Your Starter

I refresh my starter 2 to 3 times a week. The more frequently it is used the better it is. I generally make two loaves of bread a week and, on Saturday, I make sourdough waffles for the boys. How you use yours is up to you. Some weeks I can't get around to baking two loaves, so I will compost some of my start and refresh it.

To continue the starter use about half of the start or discard (or compost) the starter. Then feed the starter by adding 3/4 cup and 2 Tablespoons of flour and 1/2 a cup of water (bet you didn't see that coming!). Stir until smooth and allow it to sit for a couple days at the most. Being consistent with feeding is really important to the life and potency your sourdough start. It's like having a pet - you can't neglect it or freeze it!