

Sourdough Bread Baking

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Introduction

In order to make this recipe, you first need an active sourdough starter. See my tutorial or any online tutorial on how to make a starter. The type of starter that you'll need is a '100% hydration' or 'wet' starter, which is what I demonstrated, and what the vast majority of online recipes make (whether or not they use these terms).

This recipe makes a round sourdough loaf. There are many ways to vary the baking and the schedule! I will go over what I think is the easiest AND best schedule, and also most available but not quite the best baking technique. After I go through the recipe, I will discuss variations, and then include a set of videos that can take you through the process.

Note that baking with only starter takes *a lot more time* than baking with yeast. However, the additional time is mostly unattended.

Finally, I will discuss how to keep your starter going after you bake.

Ingredients

.5 cup fed and fully risen starter: you will need to feed it between 5-9 hours before you are ready to bake (also, you will need a bit more starter than this remaining to keep the starter going)

3.5 cups flour (all white flour or up to a cup of whole grain flour – I personally like 3 cups white flour and .5 cup rye)

1.33 cups water (or, 1 and 1/3, if you prefer fractions)

2 teaspoons salt (add more or use less depending on what you like – I use 2.25 t, but as little as 1t will be fine if you're on a low salt diet)

Tools and Schedule

At least one baking sheet (2 is ideal) OR a dutch oven with a lid
(I will use the baking sheet method for this demonstration – the dutch oven method is somewhat superior and easier, but not everybody has a dutch oven.)

I will demonstrate the 'overnight/refrigerator' method (the easiest and probably best method, but you can definitely do this over the course of a day with no problems).

I discuss both variations (dutch oven and day-long schedule) below.

Method (this is the overnight method – the dough does not leave the bowl until you bake it the next day)

1. **The night before you want to bake and at least two hours before you go to bed**, add water and starter to a large mixing bowl. Mix with a spoon. Add the flour and mix with a spoon until mostly incorporated. Don't worry if it seems a bit dry.

→ wait 30-90 minutes

2. Add salt. Using a dampened hand, incorporate salt completely. Now, place one hand in the middle of the mass of dough, and, with the other hand, grab a section of the dough, pull it up, and then fold it over the middle. Turn the bowl so you do it 4 times, one for each 'corner' of the round mass of dough. **DO NOT KNEAD IT!** Use this '**stretch and fold**' method for best results.

I demonstrate adding the salt and stretching and folding here: <https://youtu.be/OHx9BxtLgk>

→ wait 30-90 minutes

3. Stretch and fold the dough 4-6 more times, waiting 30-90 minutes between each stretch and fold session. I know that the timings seem very imprecise, but that is okay. It can be rushed by stretching-and-folding just four times total over 2 hours, or you can leave it for a while and stretch-and-fold 4-6 times over many hours.¹

4. The last time you stretch-and-fold, finish by shaping the loaf into a ball. You do this by picking the whole thing up (it will be pretty easy to deal with after all the stretching and folding), and 'tucking the dough under itself' - this is a hard thing to describe, but you'll get better at it over time. You can see this in action at 1:00 into this video: <https://youtu.be/fv2oWfwMi6o> Put the dough ball back into the bowl with the seam-side down/rounded side up.

5. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap (air tight) and refrigerate over night. Refrigeration should last *at least* 10 hours and can go *up to* 24 hours (or probably more). However, 12-18 hours is probably the sweet spot for this.

→ wait 10-24 hours once in the fridge

6. Leaving the dough in the fridge, but at a point when you're ready to bake and have 90 minutes or so at home, preheat the oven to 450. **If** you have an extra baking sheet, put water in one baking sheet and place it in the oven before turning it on – this will create steam, which is a crucial part of getting professional crust (bakeries have special steam-injected ovens – so we're trying to recreate that somewhat here).

7. Once the oven is preheated, carefully remove your dough by moving your fingers around the bowl and getting your hands underneath the dough ball. Lift the dough ball directly up and place it on a baking sheet (placing it on parchment paper or a lightly oiled surface is ideal but not really necessary). Take a sharp bread knife and cut one line down the middle of the ball, or cut two lines in a cross-hatch manner. These cuts should be about ½ to 1 inch deep.

¹ You can also incorporate the salt with the flour in the first step, stretch-and-folding 4 times over 2 hours for the quickest way.

8. Place bread in the oven and bake for 20 minutes. Remove from oven and cover with tin foil to prevent burning.
9. Put the now-covered dough back in the oven (still at 450), and bake for 20-25 more minutes.
10. Remove from the oven, and **carefully** tap on the (very hot) underside of the loaf to see if it makes a hollow ‘thud’ should – this indicates that it is fully baked. Let it cool for *at least* 30 minutes before eating – it will continue cooking during this cool-down time, and the crust will develop.
11. If you made it this far, congratulations! You are on your way to truly professional bread, made with three total ingredients (flour and water in the starter, and flour, water, and salt in the bread, plus the starter).

Alternative Baking Technique

If you have a dutch oven with a lid, then put the dutch oven (without lid) in the oven as it preheats and do not put the pan of water in the oven. Once the oven is preheated, take out the dutch oven and put it on your stovetop (it will be blazing hot). Carefully put the dough ball in the dutch oven, and score the top with a pair of scissors. Cover the dutch oven and bake for 40 minutes. Carefully remove the lid and bake uncovered for 1-2 minutes more, just to brown the top. This method is actually far more forgiving (as the top of the bread won’t burn) and the result is somewhat better.

Alternative Schedule – over one day and no refrigeration

You can also do all of the mixing and stretch-and-folding over the course of a morning. I start when I first wake up, take out the dog, feed my kids, etc. all while stretching-and-folding whenever I have a moment. Then, cover with plastic wrap or cloth and let the dough sit for 6-10 hours, ideally in a somewhat cool spot. If your home is hot, then 6 hours should be enough.

The issue here is that artisan bakeries keep the temperature in their prep area at around 60 degrees – colder than your home but warmer than a refrigerator. So, we are left either with dough that is cold but needs longer (the overnight method) or dough that is warm. The overnight method works great – the fact that the dough is cold is not a problem at all, so long as you give it enough time. Having slightly warm dough is okay but not as good, as the shaping and scoring is a bit harder, and the bread tends to flatten out a bit instead of rising up. Nevertheless, I usually use the ‘one day’ method, but I think that overnight gives better results and is easier.

Video Tutorial

I made a set of videos to go with the recipe above. Because I became impatient with my starter, the bread didn’t turn out as great as it should have – with even one more day of maturing the starter, it would have been almost perfect. But, the result was still so far superior (not to brag) that what you could find in a grocery store that it was very much worth it. Honestly, you’d need to go downtown to get a better tasting loaf (it wasn’t very pretty though!).

Here are the videos – I am NOT a ‘youtuber,’ and therefore I didn’t edit the videos nor do I have great equipment. Please remember that you can increase the playback speed of these videos:

1. Doing the initial mix: <https://youtu.be/Q41QiW0czis>
2. Adding salt and doing the first stretch-and-fold: <https://youtu.be/OHx9BxtLgtk>
3. Another stretch-and-fold demonstration: <https://youtu.be/5EXbbmUby0w>
4. Final stretch-and-fold and shaping before overnight rise: <https://youtu.be/fv2oWfwMi6o>
5. Preheating oven and setting up steam tray: <https://youtu.be/NzIVKFiMN28>
6. Baking: <https://youtu.be/mej9y8689Ys>
7. Covering with foil half way through: https://youtu.be/rtuG8wF_AU4
8. Removing from oven and checking for doneness: <https://youtu.be/LvLuimREnz0>
9. My son and I do a taste test: <https://youtu.be/yIIiBLtmN6E>

Taking care of and refrigerating your starter

I want to mention how to take care of your starter. If you were a professional baker, you and your staff would be making bread 24 hours a day, and you’d take away starter to bake 3 or 4 times every day. If that were the case, you’d never discard/throw away starter. Instead, you would remove the starter that you needed and then replenish the starter every time you bake.

For us, though, we do need to discard starter, as the removal of old starter (either by baking or by throwing it away) and introduction of new flour keeps the acids and natural yeasts in balance. To maintain your starter, you should make sure that starter is removed (baked with or discarded) every 24 hours, if it’s not refrigerated. As discussed in the starter-demo, when you’re ready to bake in the near future, discard most of the starter and add as much flour as the bread recipe requires, then add water accordingly. When you bake, use the required amount of starter and then replenish the starter with flour when you’re putting the bread together, i.e. while the flour is still out. If you don’t plan to bake again in the very near future, just a little flour and water is all you need in there after discarding.

Keep discarding and replenishing with a little flour and water until you're ready to bake again, and then repeat the process.

If you're not planning to bake in the near future, then you can seal up the starter and put it in the refrigerator. To do this, feed the starter, seal it air-tight with the lid of the jar (if you have it) or with plastic wrap and a rubber band. **Take it out every 14 days at the longest.** Once you take it out, discard and feed. It should be good to go immediately, but it will take a bit longer to rise since it's cold.

Here is a good tutorial about this process: <https://www.kingarthurbaking.com/recipes/feeding-and-maintaining-your-sourdough-starter-recipe>

And another with tips on keeping it lean:

<https://www.kingarthurbaking.com/blog/2018/10/30/maintaining-a-smaller-sourdough-starter>

Also, there are actually many uses for sourdough starter discard, as long as you plan it right. For example, you can make sourdough pancakes with discarded starter that has fully risen and deflated – for this kind of thing, you'd add the discard but also use the typical leavening, such as baking powder. Here is a list of ideas: <https://www.kingarthurbaking.com/recipes/collections/sourdough-discard-recipes>

If your starter has been working but now does not rise, don't despair, it's probably okay. Probably it has been ignored too long. If it is not rising, then discard and feed aggressively – make sure that after discarding, there is only ~2 tablespoons of starter left, then feed it ½ cup of flour (remember, it must be unbleached flour). When it's not rising, it means that there is too much acid for the amount of natural yeast. It should come back to life. If you see actual mold (blue or pink), then unfortunately your starter is ruined. But, that is very unlikely, as the acids in the starter prevent mold.

Finally, I want to say that sourdough baking is very counter-intuitive. The more sourdough taste you want in your bread, the LESS starter you should use. The more active and sour you want your starter, the MORE you should discard with more fresh flour. This is because the sour taste is a result of the starter 'eating through' the new flour. So, if you want a very San Franciscian-style, super-sour bread, experiment with using even less starter in this recipe.

Variations

Once you've done the above recipe a few times, you might want to experiment with the many variations in shapes and recipes that you can find in cookbooks and online. There is a lot of information on how to achieve perfect rising, and how to shape your loaves in different ways. There are even tutorials on how to score your dough before baking to make beautiful designs (obviously not my strong suit!).

You can additionally use starter in recipes along with reduced amounts of yeast. Bakers that want fancy bread but without a strong taste of sourdough will mix starters and commercial (usually instant) yeast in this way. Softer breads characteristic of France and Spain are typically made in this way, for example.

As you continue baking, you'll develop your own methods, tricks, and shortcuts. Good luck!

