

Sourdough:
SIMPLIFIED



by Belle's Dirty Dishes

It's really not that hard.

If it were as hard as you think it is, I wouldn't be doing it.

I have a three-and-a-half year old, a two-year-old, and a three-month-old. I need more overwhelm in my life like I need the milk bleb I'm fighting right now (Google it. It's no fun). If you're into super scientific, precise recipes and bread essays, this isn't for you. If you want simple instructions and how-tos that you don't need a dictionary to follow, then keep reading.

I'll be answering the most frequently asked questions and pitfalls that people bring to me on a daily basis, and breaking down how to get, and keep your starter alive, and churning out delicious breads as often as you want. For every sourdough baker you find, you'll also find a different method. This is mine...the simple way that makes sourdough a therapeutic pleasure for my week in the midst of diapers and reading books, and nap time whack-a-mole, and tears, and time outside, and all of the motherhood things.

So let's dive in.

Before you get started...

Supplies to Get Started:

- sourdough starter (see next chapter)
- jar for housing starter (I use a Weck tulip jar)
- digital food scale

Optional:

- dutch oven (heavy ceramic enamel stock pot)
- long, thin wooden spoon for stirring starter
- boule-style bread baskets
- large glass or plastic bowls/containers for fermenting dough.
- fabric dough/bowl covers
- tea towels for designated bread use

STARTER

The word that drives fear and trepidation through your heart. It's fine. You don't have to be afraid of it. It's literally flour and water.

Where to get it:

There are three options: **Borrow**, **Buy** or **Make**.
It's that simple.

Borrow:

The very best way to get starter, in my opinion, is to get some active, live starter from someone local. If you don't know someone, you could always post in your local FB mom group. Normally there will be someone who has some, and we're always happy to share or maybe sell.

Buy:

If you can't do that, then the next best option is to buy a strong and proven dehydrated starter, which only takes a few days to get active. I actually sell some of mine, which descends from a 15-year-old starter, originating from San Francisco, California. You can find plenty of vendors on Etsy that sell as well, and there's of course the renowned @ballerinafarm starter, Willa.

Make:

You can always make your own. I successfully did it once, but then failed the next two times I did. I've found that when you're trying something new it's best **not** to try to make every aspect from scratch in the beginning, lest it be even more overwhelming. So my advice? Buy the starter. If you're dead set on making it, Emilie Raffa's book, *Artisan Sourdough Made Simple* has a recipe, and you can also find plenty on Pinterest. I did not include a recipe in this guide, because I don't recommend starting with that *wink*.

So you have the starter.

Now what?

Where to store it?

In the refrigerator. You should only have your starter out of the refrigerator when you're feeding and allowing it to rise, and then using it to bake. In between bakes, refrigerate it, otherwise it will starve and die. Dramatic, but true.

How and when to feed it?

There are differing opinions on this, but again, I'm here to tell you what works for me. I feed mine before and after every bake.

Example: I want to bake on Sunday. Saturday night before bed, I take the starter out, feed it, then leave it on the counter overnight to be ready to bake with in the morning. Sunday morning, I use the amount that I need, always leaving a little behind. I then feed what's left, and put it in the refrigerator. Putting it away fed keeps it much happier and healthier, and actually allows me to pull it out for impromptu bakes that I can do without having to feed.

Ratio amounts for feeding are very subjective, and vary with every baker.

This is what I do:

Before a bake, feed in a 1:4:4 ratio. Example: Place an empty jar on the digital scale. Zero it out. Add 25g starter. Zero out. Add 100g flour. Zero out. Add 100g water.

Stir and cover, allowing to rise. Immediately feed the starter before placing back in the refrigerator. How much? Double the volume. I just eyeball it. No really. Don't overthink it. Equal parts flour and water. So if there's about 1" of starter, I add equal parts (in weight) water and flour until it's at 2". Sometimes more. I usually try to have at least 1 cup of starter in the fridge to be able to pull out for a quick bake.

How do I know my starter is active AKA ready to bake with?

When it is bubbly and increases in volume (ideally doubles) when fed and left out at room temperature.

What if it isn't active?

First I'll address a few misconceptions:

- **It has to pass the float test to be active.**
 - False. (who else heard that in Dwight's voice?). I've had starter fail the float test, but it was bubbly and grew in volume and baked up just fine.
- **It has to double in size.**
 - False again. Depending on how strong my starter is, or simply environmental factors like temperature or time left to rise, my starter sometimes won't quite double in size, yet it produces bread nonetheless. Yes, perhaps in ideal baking situations it would do both of these, but I'm happy turning out good bread. When I don't have three babies to keep alive, I might try to perfect the science to amazing bread.

I killed my starter.

Probably not.

I know, because I've thought myself guilty of neglectful homicide multiple times, yet each time it has been resurrected successfully, except for maybe once. And that is why I always have some dehydrated starter on hand, just in case. Let's address a few common misdiagnoses of deceased yeast:

Myth: If there's liquid on top, it's dead.

Fact: The liquid on top is called "hooch" (who comes up with these names?), and is an alcohol thrown off by the starter when it's hungry and/or has eaten all of its food. If there's just a little, you can stir it in. If there's a 1/4" or more, I pour it off before a feed.

Myth: My starter has been at the back of my fridge for weeks. It's probably dead.

Fact: I have gone months without baking, yet still pulled the starter out, discarded most of it, fed a tiny bit and been back in business. As long as it's been stored in the refrigerator, it's probably fine.

If you see mold, that's when your starter is officially a goner, and you'll need to throw it out (not down the sink. It'll cement your pipes). And it's cases like that, and like when I absentmindedly put mine away with a fabric cover on it and it dried out that you should always have some dehydrated starter saved.

How do I dehydrate starter?

- Feed your starter.
- When it's active and bubbly, spread some out on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Leave in a dry place with air flow preferably to dry out. I have also left mine in the oven (turned off) to dry out.
- Once it is totally dry and hard, break into pieces and store in an airtight jar.
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Okay, but how do I REhydrate starter?

- Take a pinch of dehydrated starter flakes, and put them in your starter jar. Pour just enough water in to cover them and leave to soften and dissolve (about an hour).
- After an hour, stir the softened starter and water. Add 1:1 water and flour (by weight) to double the volume. Let sit for 12 hours.
- Feed again, using the same ratio.
- By this time your starter should be bubbly

The Recipes

Right about now you're probably wondering if I'll ever shut up and just tell you how to bake bread. I promise you, that unless you have a better memory than most moms I know, you **will** be referencing all of this info at some point. But here we go with the fun stuff.

I started my sourdough with a recipe very much like this one, except I made it a little simpler for you.

Tip: If you don't recognize any terms like, stretching and folding, or boule, etc. Google it! Watch Youtube videos! It's how I've learned many things.

Simple Sourdough Sandwich Bread

INGREDIENTS

150g active starter
325g water
450g organic AP flour
10g pink himalayan salt

DIRECTIONS

Whisk starter and whey together. Add flour and salt, and combine until rough dough comes together. Allow to rest for 30 minutes. Perform stretches and folds four times, allowing dough to rest for 30 minutes in between each set.

Cover bowl with damp towel and allow to rise in a warm place for 6-8 hours, or until it has doubled in size.

Remove dough to a floured surface, and gently stretch out into a 1" thick rectangle. Form into a loaf shape and place into a greased loaf pan. At this point, you can either preheat the oven, and then bake immediately, or cover and refrigerate to bake the next day, however the timing works for you.

Bake @ 400 for 30 minutes, or until central internal temperature reads 190 degrees. As soon as you take it out of the oven, rub a stick of butter over the top of the loaf as it cools, coating the entire top. This helps soften the crust.

*whether you're baking immediately, or from the fridge, make sure to allow time for the loaf to proof in the pan. Dough should be puffy and reach the top of the loaf pan, and spring back up when you touch it gently with your finger.

This is also the recipe for my basic table loaf. The only differences would be to shape into a ball instead of a loaf shape, and putting a covered dutch oven in the oven while it preheats, then baking the bread in the covered pot for 20 minutes, then uncovered for another 20 minutes.

Frequently Asked Questions

Starter

Feeding

- **How much do I have to feed it?**

a. To start out, you'll want to start with a 1:4:4 ratio. I'm using that term because you will come across it in the sourdough world, so let me explain it: 1 part starter to 4 parts water, and 4 parts flour. This ratio is measured in weight. So to simplify it further: for most recipes, I start with 25g starter, 100g water, and 100g flour. That will result in 225g of active starter. You can then use up to 200g of starter, which will leave you 25g to feed and put back in the refrigerator. I often have more starter left than that, but still, that gives you the idea. **DO NOT OVERTHINK THIS.** Make sure that your total weight will be plenty enough to bake with what your recipe calls for, but don't overthink how much you'll have left. You will use the discard. It'll be fine.

b. Once you've been baking for a while, you'll get so familiar with the texture, thickness, and look of your starter, that you'll be able to feed it without even measuring. I barely ever measure now because I just **know** what it needs to look and feel like. You're probably skeptical. I was too. It's fine, you'll see.

- **How often do I have to feed it?**

As often as you want to bake. I've gone weeks to months without baking, and usually can just pull it out of the refrigerator, feed it, and the next morning I'm baking with strong, active starter.

- **What's your daily feed routine?**

I don't feed my starter daily. I feed it before and after every bake, and any extra goes in a "discard" jar to use for waffles, pancakes, etc.

- **Can you make a gluten-free starter?**

Yes. I haven't personally done it, but I believe Lindsey Gremont (@homemademommy) has. My friend @cooking.with.cassi has for sure.

...more frequently asked questions...

- **More recipes!**

I get this request a lot, and I do dole them out here and there on IG. Most of my recipes are from Emilie Raffa's book (mentioned in the beginning of this book), and then I've adapted some of my own. I am compiling all of my recipes and plan to do a cookbook at some point of all of my sourdough recipes, since IG is pretty bad for accessing recipes. So stay tuned on my Instagram page to see that!

- **How long can starter survive in the refrigerator?**

I've had starter survive months without being used or fed. Before tossing starting, **always** try feeding a few times. If there are bubbles and if it rises, there's life.

- **Why is my bread dense?**

A few causes of a dense loaf could be:

- not getting your starter active enough before a feed
- not allowing it to ferment long enough.
- not allowing it to proof (brief rise) once it's shaped and before baking.

- **Is my starter dead?**

Probably not, but let's do a little test:

Does it have mold? If yes, throw it out and start over. If no, keep reading.

Is it rock hard because you forgot to take the breathable lid off and it dried to death?

If yes, throw it out and start over and ask me how I know. If not, keep reading.

Does it have bubbles, or rise at all when you feed it? Then it's alive. Here are a few ways to get your starter more active:

- Feed with whole wheat or spelt flour. The whole grains seem to really kick it into gear.
- Feed it MORE.
- Feed it more often.

Ideally, I would have even more information in here, but I'm at a point where I need to dedicate my time elsewhere, so I'm leaving it at this and releasing it to you, incomplete as it is, because it's still a good place to start.

Let me know if this was helpful--I always appreciate reviews or comments posted to your stories, or sent to me in a DM. Unless of course you don't like it, then you can keep those to yourself. KIDDING.

xo *Belle*