



The IncrEDIBLE Discourse Show Planning Guide

Hello chefs, today we talk all about bread and how to unlock flavor with simple recipes. I am Mark Grigsby, your chef and guide through this experience, and this.. Is the IncrEDIBLE Discourse.

So as we always do, a little update about what's been going on in the world of your favorite podcast. I'm currently planning season 2, and let me tell you, it's going to be amazing. I have a lot of things planned for the second season. I want to be able to offer even more insight, knowledge and value for the show. I can't wait to tell you all about everything that's in the works. For all of you guys who have subscribed to the show, I appreciate you for listening in every week and engaging. I know you all are getting 1% better every day.

Speaking of.. If you haven't already or this is your first time with us. Hit the like and subscribe button wherever you're listening to this. You'll be helping your fellow culinarians discover us and indirectly be helping them get 1% better. Pay it forward.. That's what I always say. Imagine a world where we can all speak through food.. Thoroughly and creatively. Sounds great right? Then hit that like and subscribe button and let's make it a reality!

Now let's get onto the subject of today's episode. I'm really excited about this one guys.. it's a long one, but I'm thrilled to be talking about bread and doughs today. I know that can be intimidating for those who have never done it before. But today I'm going to teach you to not be afraid of it. It's just another part of our labor of love. And once you get good at it, it provides an element to your cooking that's unmatched. And besides.. Who doesn't love a slice of freshly baked bread, huh? Celiacs don't come after me.. You guys have your own thing going on.. Cauliflower bread or whatever.

Anyway let's dive into it.

So.. what makes bread.. Bread?

Let's start with the truth:

Bread is not complicated. It's not some sacred, elusive thing you need a European bakery and a mother starter passed down through generations to make.

It's *flour*, *water*, *salt*, and *yeast*.

That's it. Four ingredients — all humble, all accessible — that, when treated with intention, can turn into one of the most comforting, craveable foods on the planet.

Now here's where it gets deeper.

Just because something is simple doesn't mean it's easy. You can throw those four things in a bowl and get a lump of dough. But getting a loaf that *sings* when you crack it open? That takes understanding. Not a ton of gear. Not a certification. Just... understanding.

So let's break down the basics, yes?

You've got your ingredients:

- **Flour** — your structure and starch. Choose the right one and it'll support the whole thing.
- **Water** — activates gluten, hydrates starches, and brings it all together.
- **Salt** — critical. It's not just flavor; it controls fermentation and strengthens gluten.
- **Yeast** — whether it's a packet or a wild sourdough starter, it's your engine. It's what makes dough rise, but more importantly, it *builds flavor over time*.

Now here's the kicker:

The *ratios* and *timing* — not the ingredients themselves — are where most people mess up.

Now.. what is hydration?

If you've ever seen someone talk about "75% hydration" and thought, "What the hell does that mean?" — you're not alone.

Hydration is just the water-to-flour ratio. Higher hydration means looser, more open crumb like ciabatta, sourdough or rustic country loaves. Lower hydration means tighter structure like sandwich bread, brioche or bagels. That one variable alone drastically changes the texture and final product — without changing the ingredient list at all.

Here's what most home cooks miss: flavor doesn't come from kneading, or even baking. It comes from fermentation — the time you let your dough sit, stretch, relax, and slowly break down.

That's why an overnight dough always tastes better.

It's not a gimmick. It's biology. Yeast + time + temperature = complexity. You don't need a special starter or a 2-week-aged sponge. Even with dry yeast, if you give your dough 24 hours in the fridge, you'll unlock way more flavor than rushing it on the counter.

Bulk fermentation is your first rise. That's when flavor's built and gluten forms. Proofing is the second — shaping, resting, final prep before the oven.

Skip or rush either one and you're robbing your bread of its full potential.

So how do you know when to Knead, Stretch, or Fold?

You've got options — and no, you don't need to beat your dough into submission for half an hour like it owes you money.

Gluten *wants* to develop. Your job is to give it the right environment and a little guidance. That's it.

- **Kneading?** Yeah, it's still useful, especially early on when you're building the initial structure.
- **Stretch and folds?** That's the move during bulk fermentation — gentle, controlled, and way less work.
- **Slap and fold?** That's your weapon when you're working with high-hydration doughs that feel like pancake batter trying to escape the bowl.

You don't have to white-knuckle it. Let the dough do some of the lifting — you just have to know *when* to step in.

And I'm gonna give you a pro tip so you know when you've built the gluten and it's ready to shape. Enter the **windowpane test**. Take a piece of dough, stretch it between your fingers — if it holds and forms a thin, translucent sheet without tearing, you've built solid gluten. If it rips early? Not ready.

That's your visual checkpoint right there.

Now If you're not shaping your dough with intention, you're leaving structure and crust development to chance.

Surface tension matters. Tight shaping builds a strong skin, which leads to better rise, more defined crumb, and a beautiful crust.

Scoring — those slashes on top — aren't just for looks. They're your pressure valves. Without them, the dough will explode in weird, unpredictable places. With them? You guide the oven spring. You decide how it blooms.

Most people bake their bread way too cold. You need heat and you need it fast.

A preheated Dutch oven gives you two gifts: radiant heat and steam — both of which are crucial for crust. No Dutch oven? Throw a tray of ice cubes into a screaming hot pan on the bottom rack and keep the door shut. Steam slows crust formation just long enough for a perfect spring.

Let's talk about the mistakes I see over and over again — and they're all fixable. First off, under-proofing. That's the number one reason your bread comes out dense and gummy in the middle. You rushed it. On the flip side, over-proofing leaves you with a loaf that looks great in the bowl but collapses the second it hits the oven. Why? Because the structure broke down — it ran out of gas.

Another one? Using way too much flour when you're kneading. I get it — sticky dough freaks people out. But every time you add flour, you're drying it out, and that's how you end up with a tight, dry crumb and a sad rise.

And probably the biggest one? Not giving your dough enough time. Bread needs time to ferment, to develop flavor, to come alive. Rush that process, and what you get is bread that technically works... but tastes like nothing.

So.. let's get one thing straight — not all doughs play by the same rules. You've got *lean doughs* and you've got *enriched doughs*. A lean dough is your stripped-down, no-frills foundation: flour, water, salt, yeast. That's your baguette, your sourdough, your pizza dough — clean, crisp, chewy. Nothing to hide behind. It's all about gluten structure, fermentation, and technique. Now, once you start adding things like eggs, butter, milk, or sugar? That's an enriched dough. Different beast entirely. Think brioche, challah, dinner rolls. Those ingredients soften the dough, weigh it down, and slow the rise — but they also give it richness, tenderness, that golden color, that pull-apart texture people go nuts for. The point is: the moment you enrich a dough, the rules change. You need to treat it with more patience, more control, and way more awareness of temperature — because all that fat and sugar messes with fermentation. So don't expect your sweet roll dough to act like your sourdough. It won't. And it shouldn't.

We touched on hydration earlier, but let's zoom in, because this one variable changes everything — crumb, crust, chew, the whole vibe of the bread. Hydration just means how much water you're putting in compared to flour. That's it. A 75% hydration dough means for every 100 grams of flour, you've got 75 grams of water. But that little number? It decides whether your bread is tight and structured, or open and airy with those big, irregular holes everyone's chasing on Instagram. Higher hydration doughs give you that open crumb, crispy crust, and chewy center — but they're also stickier, trickier to handle, and they punish bad technique. Lower hydration gives you something tighter, more uniform — think sandwich loaves or bagels. And here's the kicker most home cooks miss: it's not just about how much water you add, it's *when* and *how* you handle it. If you're dumping in flour to "fix" sticky dough, you're killing your hydration and screwing up your final product. So instead of fighting the dough, learn to feel it. Wet dough just means you're building something with potential. You don't tame it by drying it out — you tame it by learning how to work with it.

Bread isn't hard to make — it's just misunderstood. That's the real issue. Most people either overcomplicate it with too much gear and jargon, or they underestimate it and rush the process. And both approaches miss the point. Bread doesn't require a stand mixer, a \$300 proofing box,

or a sourdough starter that's older than your kid. What it does require is attention — and a willingness to slow down and listen to what the dough is telling you. That's why people get frustrated. They're expecting instant results from something that's built around patience. Bread rewards restraint. It rewards time. And that brings us to the part that actually *makes* the bread — fermentation.

Fermentation is where the real magic happens. It's not just about making the dough rise — it's where the flavor comes from, where the texture develops, and where those four basic ingredients start turning into something way bigger than the sum of their parts. If you skip or rush that? You don't get bread. You get disappointment. So let's break down how fermentation works and why it's the backbone of everything else we're doing.

Let's clear this up, because a lot of people lump it all together and end up confused. **Bulk fermentation and proofing are not the same thing** — they're two separate stages, and they both matter.

Bulk fermentation is your first rise. That's where the dough goes from a shaggy, lumpy mess into something smooth, elastic, and alive. This is when yeast gets to work — consuming sugars, releasing gas, and slowly developing flavor and structure. That word *bulk* means it's rising as one big mass, usually right after mixing. You're not shaping anything yet. You're just letting it sit, stretch, and build strength — usually with a few folds along the way to help the gluten along. This is when most of the real flavor develops. Skip this or cut it short, and the bread ends up flat in every sense of the word.

Proofing, on the other hand, is the final rise *after* shaping. It's where the dough is resting, relaxing, and rising one last time before it hits the oven. This is your last chance to get the timing right — go too long and the dough loses tension and collapses in the oven. Not long enough and it won't have the volume or crumb you want.

So here's the bottom line: bulk fermentation builds the dough's character. Proofing fine-tunes it. Treat them like two separate jobs — because they are — and your bread will finally start behaving the way it's supposed to.

Let's talk about **autolyse** — and don't let the fancy name throw you. This isn't some advanced bakery technique reserved for French patisseries. It's one of the simplest, smartest moves you can make when working with dough — and most home bakers skip it entirely.

Here's what it is: before you even think about adding salt or yeast, you mix just the **flour and water** together. That's it. No kneading, no shaping — just a rough mix until everything's hydrated. Then you let it sit. Fifteen, twenty, maybe even thirty minutes. What's happening during that time? Magic. The flour starts absorbing water, gluten begins developing on its own, and enzymes in the flour start breaking down starches into sugars — basically setting the stage for better fermentation, stronger structure, and a dough that's way easier to work with.

It's like a head start for your dough. You're letting time do the work instead of your forearms.

When you come back and start your mix for real — adding salt, yeast, doing your folds — the dough's already ahead of the game. It'll be smoother, more elastic, and way more forgiving. You don't have to muscle it into submission. You just gave it time to become what it wants to be.

So next time you're tempted to rush straight into mixing and kneading, stop. Let the dough autolyse. Let it think. Let it breathe.

Because when you do? You're not just making better bread — you're working smarter, not harder.

Time equals taste. Full stop. You want better bread? Give it time. It's not about doing more — it's about doing *less* and letting the dough do what it's supposed to do. Longer fermentation gives your bread character. It deepens the flavor, strengthens the gluten, and gives you a crust and crumb that you can't fake with shortcuts.

Here's the science in plain English: when you give dough time — especially cold time — enzymes start breaking down the starches into sugars. Yeast feeds on those sugars, produces gas, and builds flavor as it works. That's why a dough that ferments overnight in the fridge tastes so much better than one you try to crank out in two hours. It's not just fluffier — it's more complex. It's got that subtle tang, that toasted caramel note in the crust, that chewy texture that makes you go back for another piece even though you swore you were done.

This is where home cooks get it wrong — they focus on rise instead of *time*. They see volume and think, "Cool, it's ready." No. Just because your dough doubled in size doesn't mean it's reached its full potential. That's like judging a steak by how fast it hit medium-rare instead of whether it rested before slicing.

So if you take one thing away from this: **slow down**. Let the dough ferment. Let it chill. Put it in the fridge overnight. Build that flavor like you would a good stock or a proper sauce. Because bread isn't just baked — it's *developed*.

So let's talk yeast — commercial vs. wild. This is where people start acting like it's a religion, but let's cut through the noise.

Commercial yeast — whether it's active dry or instant — is predictable. It shows up, does its job, and clocks out. You get fast fermentation, reliable rise, and consistent results. That's why it's used in bakeries and production kitchens all over the world. It's not lesser — it's just controlled. If you're learning, or you're short on time, commercial yeast is a great tool. There's no shame in using it. I've built killer loaves off commercial yeast — it all depends on how you handle the dough.

Wild yeast — sourdough — that's a different animal. It's slower, less predictable, and demands more attention. You're cultivating a living starter, full of wild bacteria and natural yeast that you've basically invited in and fed like a pet. But in return, you get flavor that commercial yeast can't touch. Sourdough gives you that natural tang, deeper crust color, more complex crumb, and a longer shelf life without preservatives. But it takes patience. You can't rush sourdough. And if you try? It'll let you know.

So what's better? Neither. It's not about one being "right" — it's about choosing the right tool for the job.

If you want bread tonight? Go commercial.

If you want bread next week that tastes like it came from a wood-fired bakery in the Alps? Sourdough's your move.

But either way, it's not the yeast that makes the bread — *it's what you do with the time you give it.*

Cold fermentation is one of the smartest moves you can make if you want bread that actually tastes like something — and if you're trying to make it fit into a real-life schedule. Here's the play: instead of letting your dough rise on the counter for two hours and praying it tastes like a bakery loaf, you mix your dough, let it start its bulk ferment at room temp just to get things moving, then stick it in the fridge overnight. That's it.

What you're doing is slowing everything down — and that's a good thing. The yeast chills out, the enzymes take their time, and that slow, cold environment builds flavor you *cannot* get with a quick rise. You're letting the dough ferment, mellow out, and develop layers of depth that actually matter. It's the difference between flat beer and a proper saison.

Bonus? It works on your schedule. You're not chained to a rise timer. Let it cold proof while you sleep, go to work, live your life. Come back to it the next day and bake when you're ready. That's flexibility and flavor in one move — and it's how pros bake on a timeline without compromising quality.

So if you're still rushing bread from mix to bake in three hours and wondering why it tastes like nothing? That's why. Cold ferment it. Let it sit. Trust the fridge. Because when you do it right, the time you put in *yesterday* pays off tenfold *today*.

Here's a simple trick that'll level up your bread game overnight: **use a clear container for fermentation**. Doesn't have to be fancy — deli quart, Cambro, even a big plastic bowl. Just make sure you can see through it. Why? Because dough talks — and if you can't see it, you're guessing. When it's in a metal bowl under a towel, you're flying blind. But in a clear container? You can track the rise, spot the bubbles, see the gluten developing, and know exactly when it's ready to move to the next step. You can mark the starting level with a piece of tape or a Sharpie, and watch as it doubles. That visual feedback teaches you way more than a clock ever will. Fermentation isn't about setting a timer — it's about paying attention. So stop guessing, start watching. Let the dough show you what's going on.

Here's a hard truth a lot of new bakers don't want to hear: **flavor doesn't come from kneading — it comes from patience**. You can fold, slap, knead, and mix all you want, but if you don't give that dough time to rest, relax, and ferment properly, you're not developing anything but a sore shoulder. The real work happens when you *don't* touch it. When you step back and let the

yeast do what it was designed to do. That's where the depth comes from. That's where the crust starts to mean something.

Now, that's not to say technique doesn't matter — it absolutely does. You still need to know when to intervene and how to handle the dough without wrecking it. That's where the next part comes in. Let's walk through the **key techniques** that actually move the needle — the things that separate a forgettable loaf from something people remember.

Alright, let's get into it — because this is where most people start fighting their dough for no reason. **Kneading vs. stretch and folds** — they're not interchangeable, and they're not just personal preference. They each serve a purpose, and if you know *when* to use them, you'll stop working harder than you have to.

Kneading is old-school, and there's a reason it's still around. It builds gluten fast, develops structure, and gives you a strong, tight dough when you need it. It's great when you're working with a lower hydration formula — something like a sandwich loaf, a roll, anything you want to hold shape and slice clean. You're actively aligning the gluten strands with your hands, building strength from the start.

But here's the thing — you don't always *need* to knead. Especially with higher hydration doughs — ciabatta, sourdough, pizza — you're better off using **stretch and folds**. It's a gentler approach that builds structure over time without beating the dough to death. You're folding the dough onto itself during the bulk ferment, giving it time to relax between rounds. And every time you fold, you're reinforcing that gluten network without knocking out all the gas you just spent hours developing.

So when do you knead? When the dough's tight, dry, and needs a little muscle.

When do you fold? When the dough's loose, sticky, and needs *time* more than tension.

You don't earn better bread by overworking it. You earn it by knowing *when to let go* and when to step in. This isn't a brawl — it's a partnership. So stop trying to control the dough and start working *with* it. It'll tell you what it needs — if you're paying attention.

Let's talk about the **windowpane test** — because this is one of the most straightforward, reliable ways to figure out if your dough is ready to move on... or if you're jumping the gun.

Here's how it works: you pinch off a small piece of dough, flatten it slightly, and gently stretch it out between your fingers. And I mean *gently* — this isn't a tug-of-war. You're looking to stretch it thin enough that light can pass through it — like a sheet of plastic wrap — *without* it tearing. If you can do that, congrats: your gluten network is developed and the dough's got enough strength to hold structure. That's a green light to stop kneading or folding and let it do its thing.

If it tears quickly or feels like it's just stretching unevenly with no elasticity? It's not ready yet. That gluten still needs time to form, whether that means more kneading or another set of stretch and folds.

This test is about feel, not numbers. Doesn't matter if your timer says it's been 10 minutes. If the dough isn't holding that stretch, you're not there yet.

Bottom line — don't guess. Don't go off a recipe that says "knead for 8 minutes" and call it done. Test it. Stretch it. Look for that windowpane. The dough will tell you exactly what it needs... if you're willing to listen. That's the difference between bread that *just rises* and bread that holds structure, has chew, and delivers that real-deal bakery texture every time.

This is the part nobody wants to talk about, but it might be the most important move in the whole process: **shaping**. Not just flopping dough into a pan and hoping for the best — I'm talking about intentional, controlled shaping that builds **surface tension**.

Here's the deal — when you shape dough properly, you're creating a tight outer layer that holds everything together. That surface tension is what gives your bread its final structure. It's what traps the gas from fermentation, helps the loaf rise up instead of out, and sets you up for a killer crust. Skip this step or half-ass it, and your dough might rise... but it's going to spread, sag, or just look sloppy.

Surface tension is *built*, not wished for. You get it by tucking and turning the dough into itself — pulling that outer layer taut without tearing it. You're not beating it up, you're coaxing it into form. It's like cinching the skin on a balloon — you want a smooth, elastic top that's got just enough give to hold pressure without popping.

This is also where consistency shows. If you shape with confidence and control, you get loaves that rise evenly, bake beautifully, and have that pro-level look and feel. You get crust that sings when it cools and crumb that holds up when you slice it.

So if your bread keeps coming out flat, spreading like a pancake, or baking up with a weird dome — it probably isn't your recipe. It's your shaping. Slow down. Get your hands on the dough. Build that tension. **You're not just forming bread — you're setting the stage for everything that comes next.**

Let's kill this idea right now: **scoring isn't decoration**. It's not about looking fancy. It's not Instagram fluff. Scoring is functional — it's *surgical*. It controls how your bread expands in the oven, and if you skip it or do it wrong, you're leaving that final rise — the oven spring — completely up to chance.

Here's what's really happening: when your dough hits that hot oven, the yeast goes into overdrive one last time before it dies off. That trapped gas expands fast. And if the dough doesn't have a release valve? It's going to blow out wherever it wants — usually the weakest part of the crust. That's how you end up with loaves that explode out the side, split down the back, or just balloon unevenly. That's not "rustic" — that's bad scoring.

When you score with intention — clean, confident cuts with a sharp blade — you're guiding that expansion. You're telling the dough *exactly* where to open up. It's like pressure relief. That one move gives you those beautiful ears, dramatic openings, and that pro-level bloom that makes

the crust curl just right. And yeah — it happens to look good too. But the look is a *result* of good technique, not the reason behind it.

So don't treat scoring like a garnish. It's the final step in shaping the bread's identity. Use a lame, razor, or sharp knife, get your angle right, and commit to the cut. Score with purpose — because that blade is the last tool you use before the heat takes over.

Let me say this as clearly as possible: **if your oven isn't screaming hot when that dough goes in, you've already lost.** That first blast of heat — the *initial shock* — is what gives you oven spring. It's the final push where your dough goes from proofed to fully alive, expanding fast before the crust sets. And if your oven's sitting at 375°, or it hasn't fully preheated yet? You just robbed your bread of everything it was building toward.

Here's the science: the yeast gives off one last surge of gas when it hits heat. That expansion only lasts a few minutes — we're talking a short window where the bread can rise one last time and lock in its final shape. If your oven's too cold, or you open the door every 30 seconds to peek, you kill that window. The result? A loaf that's flat, pale, or worse — gummy in the middle and overbaked on the outside.

You want a pro crust? You want deep color, crackle, real structure? Crank the heat. For most lean doughs, I'm talking **475°F or higher**. And use a baking stone, steel, or a preheated Dutch oven if you can — something with thermal mass that holds that heat and radiates it back into the dough fast. That's how you get that crisp bottom, that dark, blistered crust, that rise that turns heads.

Bottom line? Don't let a cold oven kill a good loaf. Bread's been working all day to get to this moment — don't blow it at the finish line.

So let's talk about some common mistakes to avoid when baking bread... or maybe they're actually tips. Either way, these 5 points will help you make better bread, more consistently.

Under proofing. This is the classic rookie mistake — pulling your dough too early because it *looks* big enough. Just because it doubled in size doesn't mean it's done fermenting. If you rush it, the gluten hasn't finished developing and the yeast hasn't done enough work to give you the texture and flavor you're after. You throw it in the oven and think, "Cool, it's rising!" Then you slice into it and get a gummy, undercooked mess in the middle. Why? Because the dough wasn't ready. It rose on the outside but stayed raw at the core. Always judge by feel, not just time or size. Press the dough — it should spring back slowly, not bounce like a rubber ball. That's when it's ready.

Over proofing. The other side of the same coin. You let it go too long, and now the dough's blown out. It looks massive, but the structure's shot. The gluten's overstretched, the gas is gone, and the second you try to score or bake it, it collapses like a bad soufflé. Over-proofed dough feels loose, slack, and kind of soupy — like it's barely holding together. If you've ever had a loaf flatten out or spread instead of rising, this is probably why. You can't rescue it once it's gone too

far — you have to catch it *before* it hits that point. Watch the dough. Feel the tension. Don't sleep on the timing.

Skipping proper shaping. If you're just flopping dough into a pan or onto a peel without shaping it properly, you're setting yourself up for a weird, uneven bake. The loaf might rise in one direction, tear open in another, and end up with giant holes in one spot and tight, dense crumb in another. Why? Because there was no internal structure. You didn't build surface tension. You didn't line up the gluten. Shaping isn't optional — it's how you lock in that final form and give the dough a map for how to rise. Take the extra two minutes to do it right. You'll see the difference in every slice.

Alright those are things not to do. Here are two that you should always do.

Let the dough rise cold. This is the pro move most home bakers skip — and it shows. Cold fermentation slows everything down, and that's a *good* thing. You get more flavor, better gluten development, and a dough that's easier to work with the next day. It's not just about taste — it's about control. You're not tied to a strict clock. You can mix today, rest it in the fridge, and bake tomorrow when it fits your flow. And the bread you pull out will have more depth, better structure, and a crust that actually sings when it cools. Stop rushing. Cold dough, hot oven — that's the move.

Use a Dutch oven. If you don't have a steam-injected deck oven sitting in your kitchen — spoiler alert, you don't — then a Dutch oven is your best friend. Preheat it screaming hot, load your dough, and put the lid on. What you've done is trap steam in a tight space, which delays the crust from setting and gives the loaf time to expand. That means taller loaves, better spring, and a crust that's shatteringly crisp. It mimics what the pros use in bakeries without needing thousands of dollars in equipment. You want bakery-style results at home? Start with a Dutch oven.

Now I understand that was a lot at once. But they are the fundamentals of baking bread. And now that we've learned how to expand our bread, it's time to expand our minds...

And you know what that means... It's time for..

Food for thought. Or what I like to call... pro tips from a chef's lips.

Let's pivot now — we've talked about the ingredients, the process, and the technique. But let's be real: **gear matters**. You don't need a deck oven or a proofing chamber, but the right tools — the *right* ones — make the work easier, more consistent, and way more enjoyable. And not all of them are expensive or complicated. Some of the best upgrades you can make to your bread game come from dead-simple tools that actually do the job right.

Let's start with the one that makes the biggest impact right out the gate: **a cast iron Dutch oven**. We just mentioned this one in the last segment.

If there's one piece of equipment that instantly levels up your crust, it's this. You don't need anything fancy — just a solid, heavy-lidded pot that can hold serious heat. When you preheat it and drop your dough inside, you're creating the kind of environment that most home ovens can't deliver on their own: *hot, enclosed, and steamy*.

That lid traps moisture from the dough itself, creating natural steam. And steam at the start of baking? That's what gives you real oven spring. It keeps the outer crust soft just long enough for the loaf to fully expand before setting. You get tall rise, defined ears, deep color, and that signature shatter when it cools.

No Dutch oven? You're relying on a dry oven and crossed fingers. The crust forms too fast, the rise gets choked, and your bread ends up looking and tasting... fine. But not great.

This one tool solves all of that in a single move — no gimmicks, no hacks, no spritzing water into your oven like it's a sauna. Just a heavy pot doing what bakery ovens do with steam injection. **If you're baking bread at home and you're not using a Dutch oven yet, this is your first real upgrade.**

But let's say you don't have a Dutch oven — no worries. You've still got options. Steam is the key, and you can still make it happen with what you've already got in your kitchen.

Here's the move: throw some ice cubes into a ripping hot sheet pan or cast iron skillet on the bottom rack of your oven right when you load your dough. That sudden blast of steam? That's your DIY version of a pro steam-injected deck oven. It slows down crust formation, gives your loaf time to fully expand, and sets you up for better rise and color.

If you don't have ice, a cup or two of hot water in a preheated pan works too — just be quick and careful when you open that oven. You're not spritzing or guessing here — you're creating real, consistent steam that buys you those first critical minutes where the crust stays soft and the dough has space to grow.

No Dutch oven? Fine. But no steam at all? That's a problem. Dry ovens choke the rise. Your crust sets too early, and the bread ends up pale and tight. So use what you've got — ice, water, a pan that holds heat. Doesn't have to be fancy. It just has to be hot, and it has to create steam right when it matters.

Bread's not about having the perfect setup. It's about knowing *why* things work, and finding smart ways to make them happen anyway.

Not every upgrade has to be dramatic. Sometimes it's the smallest tools that make the biggest difference — and in breadmaking, that starts with a **digital scale** and a **bench scraper**.

First, the scale. If you're still measuring flour by the cup, you're already behind. Volume measurements are inconsistent — one person's "one cup" could be 120 grams, another's could be 160. That's a massive swing when it comes to hydration, gluten development, and final structure. Bread is a formula. If your numbers are off, your dough is off — period. A digital scale

eliminates the guesswork. Grams in, grams out. Precision matters here, and it makes your process repeatable. That's how you get better.

Now the bench scraper — this one's criminally underrated. It's not just for cleaning the table. It's an extension of your hand. Use it to portion dough, fold, lift, rotate, and shape — especially when you're working with high-hydration doughs that like to stick to everything. It gives you control without beating the dough up. And during cleanup? Nothing beats it. One quick pass and your station's clean.

Together, these two tools do more than just make things easier — they make things *smarter*. They tighten up your workflow, keep your measurements honest, and give you the kind of control that turns guesswork into consistency. You don't need a bunch of gadgets to bake good bread — but you do need the right ones. And these are the first two I'd put in anyone's kit.

When it comes to proofing, most people focus on time. But *how* you proof matters just as much as *how long*. That's where a **banneton** — or even just a **bowl lined with a floured towel** — comes into play.

A banneton isn't just for looks. It's a tool that supports your dough during that final rise, helping it keep its shape while developing a dry, tensioned surface — key for structure and crust. If you've ever had a dough that spreads out instead of rising up, this is probably what you're missing. The walls of the basket hold the shape, while the flour on the liner keeps it from sticking when you flip it out onto your peel or baking surface.

Now, if you don't have a banneton, don't panic. You can get the same result with a mixing bowl and a clean kitchen towel — just make sure it's dusted well with flour (rice flour works best — it doesn't absorb as much moisture, so the dough won't stick). The idea is the same: you're giving the dough support and structure during that final, crucial stage before it hits the oven.

This isn't about being fancy — it's about setting your bread up to rise *upward* instead of outward. A flat loaf usually isn't a bad recipe — it's a lack of support. So whether you're investing in a proper basket or using what you've got, just make sure your dough's not free-floating on a baking sheet. Guide the shape. Build the structure. **Let the proofing vessel do some of the heavy lifting — and your loaf will show it.**

Alright — let's talk sourdough starter. This is where a lot of people psych themselves out. They hear "wild yeast" and suddenly think they need a biology degree to bake a loaf of bread. But here's the truth: a starter is just *flour and water*. That's it. Mixed, fed, and left alone long enough to come alive. It's not magic — it's fermentation.

The key is **consistency**, not complexity. You don't need to overthink it. Equal parts flour and water, once a day, same time every day. Keep it somewhere warm but not hot — 70–75°F is the sweet spot. And use the same flour until it's active. That's how you build a stable culture. It'll bubble, rise, fall, and start to smell slightly sweet and tangy — that's when you know it's ready to bake with.

And look, it's gonna take about a week. No shortcuts. Don't expect it to explode with life after 48 hours — that's not how wild yeast works. The first couple days will be quiet. Then it'll act alive for a minute and go flat again. That's normal. It's not dead — it's just finding balance. Keep feeding it. Let it mature.

Once it's doubling in volume and passes the float test? You're good to go. And if you can't commit to feeding it every day, toss it in the fridge and feed it once a week. Starters are more resilient than people give them credit for.

Now you may be asking yourself.. Float test? What the hell is the float test. Great question. So if you've been feeding your starter for a few days and want to know if it's ready to bake with, there's a simple test that tells you a lot: **the float test**. You take a spoonful of starter — ideally at its peak, right after it's doubled — and gently drop it into a glass of water. If it floats, it's holding enough gas and structure to properly leaven bread. If it sinks? It's either underfered, overfermented, or just not ready yet.

Now, is it perfect? No. Some great starters won't float because of hydration or timing. But as a quick gut check? It's solid. Use it as a guide — not gospel. If it floats, bake. If it doesn't, feed it, give it more time, and try again later. No drama.

Bottom line is — don't overcomplicate it. A sourdough starter isn't a pet. It's a tool. Treat it with care, but don't baby it. Build it right, feed it regularly, and it'll reward you with some of the best bread you'll ever bake.

Alright, so we've covered the dough, the technique, the gear — now let's talk about **how pros actually use all of this**.

Because at the highest level, it's not about doing *more* — it's about doing *less*, better.

The best bakers I know aren't throwing 15 ingredients into every loaf. They're working with the same basic doughs you are — they've just mastered how to extract every ounce of flavor, texture, and nuance from it. And that comes down to how you handle time, fermentation, and intention.

Let me walk you through a few go-to examples that prove the point: minimal ingredients, big payoff, and the kind of flavor that hits way harder than it should.

Let's start with **focaccia**, because this one's the perfect example of how *technique* changes the game — even when the ingredients stay the same.

At its core, focaccia is a simple, lean dough. Flour, water, salt, yeast — same foundation as your basic loaf. But instead of shaping it tight and scoring it for oven spring, you let it relax. You work with the hydration, not against it. You give it time to build flavor through fermentation, then you pan it out, drown it in good olive oil, and press those signature dimples right into the surface. That's not just for looks — it's functional. It helps trap oil and hold structure so the crumb stays airy without collapsing.

The result? Completely different bread. It's chewy, light, rich from the oil, with a golden crust that crackles and a bottom that eats like it's been shallow-fried in flavor. Same base dough — *totally different experience*.

That's the lesson here: you don't need new ingredients to get a new outcome. You just need to change how you treat the dough. Time, temperature, handling — that's what defines the final product. Focaccia proves that. And when you get it right, it's damn near unstoppable — from sandwiches to service bread to family meal.

Let's talk about **flatbreads** — because this is one of the most slept-on tools in a chef's arsenal. Naan, pita, lavash, roti, whatever culture it comes from — they all do the same thing: take a simple dough and turn it into something fast, flavorful, and incredibly versatile. And just like focaccia, it's not about changing the ingredients — it's about changing the approach.

These breads are designed for heat, speed, and adaptability. They don't need hours of proofing or complicated shaping. Most of them are cooked in a pan, on a griddle, or directly on the deck of an oven. That makes them perfect for service, for family meal, for plating components — and for delivering big flavor without slowing anything down.

Take naan — soft, blistered, brushed with ghee or garlic oil. Pita? Steam-puffed into perfect pockets. Lavash? Thin, crisp, and perfect for wraps, chips, or garnish. All of them start from essentially the same place: a basic dough, handled with intention.

This is how pros stretch their dough game. They're not just baking loaves. They're using the same base formula to create totally different textures, presentations, and flavor vehicles — built for the menu, the moment, and the dish in front of them.

Flatbreads are fast, flexible, and full of flavor — and if you're not using them yet, you're leaving money and opportunity on the table.

Let's get into **sourdough** — because this is where a lot of bakers either level up or tap out. It's not just a trend or a flex — it's a crash course in understanding fermentation on a deeper level. And once you get it, everything else you bake gets better.

At its core, sourdough is just a natural fermentation process. No commercial yeast. Just wild yeast and bacteria doing what they do best — breaking down starches, releasing gas, and building complex flavor over time. It's slower, yes. It's less predictable, absolutely. But it's also way more informative. It teaches you to read dough by feel, smell, and timing — not just by the clock or a recipe. You start paying attention to texture, strength, temperature. You stop rushing and start reacting.

And the flavor? Untouchable. That slight tang, that deep crust, the chew, the aroma — that's not coming from a packet of yeast. That's fermentation doing what only time can do.

Sourdough will expose your bad habits, real quick. If your shaping is weak, if your fermentation timing is off, if your environment's inconsistent — it's going to show. But that's what makes it so

valuable. You don't just learn how to make one type of bread — you learn *how bread works*, period.

Once you can run a sourdough from starter to bake and get it right? Everything else feels easier. It's not about showing off. It's about learning the process from the inside out.

Alright, let's wrap this up with one of the smartest ways to build big flavor *without* adding complexity to your day: **pre-ferments**. Poolish, biga, levain — whatever you're working with, the idea is the same. You take a portion of your flour, water, and a little yeast or starter, mix it ahead of time, and let it ferment before adding it to your final dough.

Why? Because it gives you the *benefits* of long fermentation — better flavor, stronger structure, longer shelf life — without having to cold-proof everything overnight. It's a cheat code for depth.

Poolish is wet, equal parts flour and water with a pinch of yeast — great for baguettes, rolls, anything that needs a light, open crumb.

Biga is stiffer, lower hydration — perfect for chewy breads like ciabatta.

Levain is what you're using in sourdough — essentially a mature, active portion of your starter built specifically for a bake.

What they all have in common is that they give your dough a head start. You mix them the night before, let them sit, and when you build your final dough the next day, you're already walking in with flavor, strength, and aroma baked in. Less yeast, more time, *way* better bread.

And the best part? You're not committing to a 3-day sourdough process. You're just taking one extra step the day before — and cashing in on it when it counts. That's how pros build flavor into their workflow without jamming up the schedule.

If you want your bread to taste like it came from a bakery without having to act like one, **start using pre-ferments**. It's low effort, high impact, and once you get the hang of it, you'll never go back.

So look — whether it's focaccia, flatbreads, sourdough, or a simple poolish — none of this is about doing *more*. It's about dialing in the basics and letting the technique carry the weight. The best bread doesn't come from complexity — it comes from repetition, restraint, and understanding what the dough needs.

You don't need a different recipe every time. You need one good dough — and the skill to bend it in whatever direction the moment calls for. That's how pros build flavor. That's how they move with confidence. And that's what gets you consistent, craveable bread that actually means something.

Today's final thought leads us right back to the heart of it all — understanding. Not recipes, not gadgets, not hacks. Just real understanding of how bread works from the inside out.

We started with the building blocks — flour, water, salt, yeast — and showed how flavor comes from patience, not overcomplication. Then we walked through the tools that actually make a difference — not to make things fancy, but to make things *repeatable*. And finally, we looked at how pros get more out of less — using simple doughs to create high-impact results, not by doing more, but by doing it *better*.

The takeaway? Bread isn't a mystery. It's a system. And once you get a handle on the why — not just the how — you can bake with confidence, adapt to any situation, and turn something simple into something unforgettable.

You don't need more ingredients. You just need better instincts. And that only comes from doing it — over and over — until the dough starts teaching *you*.

That's a wrap on today's episode of *The IncrEDIBLE Discourse*. Whether you're baking your first loaf or trying to master that perfect open crumb, remember — it's not about having all the answers. It's about understanding the process, trusting the dough, and putting in the reps.

If you're baking this week — show me what you've got.

Post your bread on **X** and tag it with **#IncrEDIBLEDiscourse** so I can see it, repost it, maybe even break it down in a future episode. We've had some killer submissions lately, and I want to keep the momentum going.

Don't forget to **subscribe on Spotify, YouTube, and Amazon Music**, and head over to the website to sign up for **The Monthly Mise** — the newsletter packed with bonus tips, episode breakdowns, and resources you won't get anywhere else.

While you're there, hit the **blog** for the full episode write-up, and grab the free **Bread Basics Starter Guide** — it's got ratios, proofing cues, and tool breakdowns to make your next bake a hell of a lot smoother.

Thanks for listening, thanks for sharing, and thanks for showing up in the kitchen — whether it's for you, your crew, or just because you love this craft. I am Mark Grigsby, and this has been another amazing episode of the incredible discourse.