

Sourdough bread making

by Andrew Harvie

This year, I decided to bake sourdough bread. Bread making has been a favourite weekend activity for many years, but I've always been afraid to try sourdough. Mostly, this fear was because of what I saw in recipes. They were either fake sourdough using commercial yeast, or else they looked far too difficult. But this year, I decided that the time had come.

The first question to ask is, "Why?" To make sourdough bread takes much longer than using dry yeast and it won't rise as high. I have three reasons, any one of which is enough. First is that it's a folksy, old-fashioned thing to do. Second is the delicious flavour. Third is that the sourdough process creates a bread that delivers up more nutrition. The natural yeast (*Candida milleri*) and the bacteria (*Lactobacillus sanfanciscensis*) that are present in all sourdough cultures, work together to create sugars and other by-products from the wheat that commercial yeast alone just cannot produce in three hours of rising time.

Having established why, the next question is, "How?" Every person I asked had a very different idea of how to make a sourdough starter. Some recommended using potatoes, some said hops. I found recipes that called for yogurt, orange juice, raisins, or grapes. The project looked daunting. Fortunately, with a bit of perseverance, a trust-worthy book, and advice from those who have gone before, I was able to separate the wheat from the chaff, as it were.

What follows are condensed notes from my experience of learning how to make this wonderful bread. Perhaps you'll find them useful if you decide to make sourdough as well.

First, forget all the exotic ingredients. You want critters that feast on flour, so don't complicate it by throwing other things into the mix. My guess is that those recipes work in spite of, rather than because of the extra ingredients. Get yourself some fresh whole wheat flour and a bit of rye (flour – not drink). You'll also need a tablespoon, a jar, a bit of plastic wrap, and some chlorine-free water.

With the materials lined up, you're almost ready to start. Be aware that the process will take 10 to 14 days and involves five minutes of work every single day. The yeast and bacteria that you want live in acidic conditions and it will take a while before your mix becomes hospitable to them. During the process, there will be a few unpleasant days that very few books mention.

So start. Put three heaping spoonfuls of wheat flour into the jar, add one of rye and just enough water to mix a thin paste. Cover the jar tightly with plastic wrap and leave it on the kitchen counter. That's it for Day 1.

At least once a day for the next 10 to 14 days, dump 2/3's of the mix down the drain and top it up with more of the flours and water in roughly the same proportions as on the first day.

Early in the process, you'll see frothy bubbles. That's good, but don't get excited. These are not the yeast you're looking for. A few days in, the microbes will seem to die. The froth will fade and it will stink. Relax – this is a normal part of the process. Smelly

but helpful critters are doing useful work in that mess. Keep refreshing the flour, rye, and water every day. You might want to move it to a fresh jar once in a while too.

By the 7th or 9th day, the bad smell will turn to a pleasantly yeasty one and the mix will turn frothy again. Keep going for a couple more days and you're there! It's time to make bread using this as the leaven for any sourdough recipe you like.

You can easily keep your starter going from week to week by putting a ball of dough from each fresh batch into the fridge. Just bury it in flour, in a jar. I've found that the leaven works better every week.

Refresh it as follows: the morning before baking day, disperse the lump in a cup of water and stir in a cup of flour. Leave it covered on the counter. The evening before baking, add 1/2 cup of flour and 1/2 cup of water. On the morning of baking day, put a spoonful back into storage and use the rest for your bread.

Recipe: Salt Rising Bread

There are a half-dozen or so recipes for the pioneer bread on the Internet. This one is featured on Susan Brown's and comes from Pearl Haines, a Pennsylvania woman who started making the bread when she was about five years old and baked it for nearly 90 years. (Haines passed away this year.) Her starter, or "raisin," as she called it, uses fewer ingredients than most recipes and has no sugar or salt.

3 teaspoons cornmeal

1 teaspoon flour

1/8 teaspoon baking soda

1/2 cup scalded milk

Pour milk onto dry ingredients in an ungreased quart glass jar or metal, glass, or pottery bowl that holds about four cups. Stir. Cover with saran wrap — and punch a hole in the wrap to keep it from sinking.

Keep starter warm, at 105-115 Fahrenheit, overnight until foamy. Three suggestions: 1) Wrap the bowl in a heating pad at the lowest setting, then wrap a towel around it. 2) Set the bowl in an electric skillet with about half an inch of water, set at the lowest temperature. 3) Put it in an oven if there's a light bulb inside that's about 60 watts and you can keep the bulb turned on, or if the oven has a "proof" setting.

Brown suggests having a thermometer on hand to check the starter's temperature several times during the rise.

After "raisin" has foamed and has a "cheesy" smell, put it in a medium-size bowl. Add 2 cups of warm water, then enough flour (about 1 1/2 cups) to make a thin pancake-like batter. Stir and let rise again until foamy. This usually takes about 1 1/2 to 2 hours.

Monitor the temperature during this stage as well.

Next, for each loaf you want to make, add one cup of warm water and 2 to 3 cups of flour (enough to be able to form the dough into a ball). Shape the dough into a loaf and place in a small loaf pan (about 8 1/2 inches by 4 1/2 by 2 1/2) greased with butter, Crisco, Pam or oil.

Let rise 2 to 3 hours. (If it doesn't rise at that point, you'll likely have to start over, Brown says.)

Bake at 350 degrees Fahrenheit for 35 to 40 minutes, or until the loaf is a light golden color and sounds hollow when tapped.

The bread has a long shelf life. "It can keep on your counter for a good week to ten days without going bad," says Brown, "and if you put it in your refrigerator it'll keep for another couple of weeks."

If you encounter any problems, Brown invites you to email her at srbwva@gmail.com.