

SOUR DOUGH FRENCH BREAD

[TWO LOAVES]

Allow a full day—24 hours—to make this good-tasting and crusty version of San Francisco's sour dough French bread. Since it is leavened with

only a starter (no commercial yeast), it needs more time for the sourness and bubbly yeast action to develop. The starter is simply one cup of milk and one cup of flour mixed together and allowed to ferment for several days (page 283).

Unlike the traditional French loaf made with a soft wheat flour, San Francisco sour dough is made with bread flour milled from hard wheat to enable it to withstand the rigors of a long fermentation.

This recipe was developed several years ago by home economists in the heart of California's sour dough country.

INGREDIENTS

Sponge: 1 cup starter

1½ cups warm water (105°–115°)

4 cups bread or all-purpose flour

2 teaspoons each sugar and salt

Dough: All of the sponge

½ teaspoon baking soda

2 cups bread or all-purpose flour, approximately

Wash: ½ cup water

1 teaspoon salt

BAKING SHEET

One baking sheet, greased or Teflon.

PREPARATION

Four or five days beforehand prepare a starter, if one is not available.

Starter
4 or 5 days
Sponge
18 hours

In a large bowl or crock, one day prior, combine the starter, water, flour, sugar and salt. Mix thoroughly, cover the bowl with plastic wrap and leave at room temperature (70°) until sponge has doubled in volume.

Bake Day
Dough
12 mins.

Stir down the sponge, sprinkle on the soda. Stir in all-purpose flour, a half cup at a time, first with the spoon and then by hand. The resulting dough should be stiff but if it should continue slack and sticky, add a tablespoon of flour.

KNEADING
8 mins.

Turn the dough onto a lightly floured work surface—counter top or bread board—and knead with a rhythmic 1-2-3 motion of push-turn-fold. The dough will become smooth and elastic, and bubbles will form under the surface of the dough. Work in a quarter cup more flour if the dough will accept it. Break the kneading rhythm occasionally by throwing the dough down hard against the counter top. Knead 8 minutes (6 under the dough hook).

SHAPING
10 mins.

Cut the ball of dough into two pieces. Let them rest under a towel for 5 minutes. Form each into a ball.

For a round loaf, place on a corner of the prepared bake sheet or in a small basket, lined loosely with a cloth and sprinkled with flour. For a long loaf, roll the ball into a 10 x 16 inch rectangle. Roll up the dough, beginning with the short side, and stopping after each turn to press the edge of the roll into the flat dough to make a firm seal. Press with the fingertips. The long loaf can be placed directly on the baking sheet or in a long cloth-lined basket to be placed on the bake sheet later.

RISING

3-4 hours

Place the baking sheet and/or the baskets in a warm place (80°-85°) until the loaves are nearly doubled in bulk. This is a natural leavening and the dough will not expand as vigorously as with commercial yeast.

Place a shallow pan of hot water on the lower shelf of the oven and preheat to 400°—near the end of the rise period.

BAKING

400°

45 mins.

If the loaves have been raised in baskets, tip the raised loaf into the hand and quickly turn the loaf right side up onto the baking sheet. Brush with water and with a razor blade slash a tic-tac-toe design on the round loaves, and diagonal cuts on the long ones.

However, for a more tender crust, brush loaves with cooking oil or melted butter instead of water and don't place the hot water on the lower shelf.

Bake in the oven until the loaves are medium dark and test done. Turn one loaf over and tap the bottom crust with a forefinger. A hard hollow sound means the bread is baked. If not, return to the oven for an additional 10 minutes. Midway in the bake period and again near the end of it, shift the loaves on the baking sheet so they are exposed equally to temperature variations.

FINAL STEP

Remove bread from the oven and place on metal rack to cool somewhat but serve warm.