

Activating Dried Sourdough Starter

Day 1 In a small bowl, soak 1-1/2 tsp dried starter in 1 tbsp lukewarm filtered water for a few minutes to soften. Then stir in 1 tbsp all-purpose flour, cover with plastic wrap, and let sit at room temperature for 24 hours.

Day 2 Stir in 1 tbsp flour and 2 tsp filtered water and let sit covered for another 24 hours.

Day 3 Stir in 1 tbsp flour and 1 tsp water. Within 12-24 hours you should see some bubbling and active fermentation. Note that the starter may seem inactive if it is too thin, since any bubbles formed will rise to the surface and pop. If this is the case, stir in more flour to thicken the mixture.

Day 4 Transfer activated starter to a non-airtight jar with lots of empty space for expansion (a flip-top jar with the rubber gasket removed works well). Stir in 1/3 cup flour and 1/4 cup water. Within 12 hours the starter should be lively and spongy.

Day 5 Onward Continue to feed once or twice per day until you have enough starter to use for baking (2 cups should be enough), then begin to store the starter in a refrigerator.

Storing and Feeding Sourdough Starter

Store starter in a non-airtight container. When stored in a refrigerator starter only needs to be fed once per week (more often if building up a supply to use for baking).

To feed starter, remove from refrigerator and allow to warm to room temperature. The starter should rise and become spongy. Stir in equal weights of flour and water (approx. 1 cup flour and 2/3 cups water), adding more flour if too thin or more water if too thick.

Try to double the volume of the mixture with each feeding. If just attempting to maintain the same supply, use (or discard) half of the starter and build back up to the original volume. To avoid having to discard unused starter, some can be used quickly by mixing it into batter (like pancake or muffin batter) to replace part of the flour and water content.

Starter should be fed with whatever type of flour you plan to use in the bake (white, whole wheat, rye, etc.). If you plan to use white flour starter for a different bake, separate out a portion of your main supply and feed it for a few rounds with the new type of flour.

It's possible to store dried starter long-term, either if you will be unable to feed it for a while or as a backup in case your main supply dies. Spread activated starter in a thin layer on a piece of parchment paper and let dry for a few days in the open. Once dry the starter will easily separate from the paper and can be ground into flakes and frozen.

Smoked Paprika Sourdough

Makes 1 boule. Like most sourdough recipes, this recipe includes very long fermentation and proving times and is intended to be refrigerated overnight and baked the next day.

Ingredients

1-1/2 cups filtered water
1 cup active sourdough starter (stir out bubbles before measuring volume)
4-1/2 cups bread flour, plus more as needed
2-1/2 tsp smoked paprika
1/8 tsp cayenne pepper
2 tsp salt
vegetable oil
cornmeal

Steps

Gather sourdough starter from your main supply to use as the levain. Leave out to warm until it becomes spongy and active.

Add water and levain to a large mixing bowl and stir to dissolve starter. Add flour, paprika, cayenne, and salt and stir to form a shaggy dough. Tip dough onto a floured surface and knead until dough is smooth and passes the window pane test (if using a stand mixer, mix with a dough hook until the dough forms a ball). Add more flour (possibly a lot more) if too sticky.

Transfer dough to a lightly oiled bowl, cover with a tea towel, and let ferment for 4–8 hours (longer fermentation leads to more sour flavor).

Shape dough into a boule by gathering in the sides and place seam-side up into a well-floured bowl. Leave at room temperature for 1 hour to expand, then transfer to a refrigerator overnight (8–12 hours). In the refrigerator it should expand slightly and the surface should dry.

Preheat oven to 450° F and leave a roasting tray on the bottom rack to warm.

Dust the surface of a large baking sheet or a bread cloche with cornmeal (this prevents the bread from sticking). Carefully invert the dough ball onto the surface, making sure not to knock the air out of it. Score the loaf with a very sharp knife or a bread lame, then tent with foil or place the cover on the cloche (this prevents the surface from browning too quickly).

Transfer baking sheet or cloche to oven and immediately pour cold water onto the heated roasting tray to create steam (this gives the bread a crispy outer crust). Bake for 30 minutes, then remove the cover and continue to bake for another 15 minutes (replace cover if the surface begins to get too dark).

The finished loaf should sound hollow when knocked on. When done, turn off the oven and leave the door ajar for a few minutes (removing the loaf immediately may cause it to contract). Remove baked loaf to a wire rack and allow to cool completely before slicing.