

Make a Sourdough Starter. It's Not That Hard.

Ingredients

- Bread flour, or any other flour you want to use, as needed 🛒
- Water, as needed

Equipment

Digital scale 🛒
1 liter Weck jar 🛒

KEYS TO GETTING STARTED

You are making a living fuel for your bread. Your fuel will be flour and water, the same food it will eat when you want it to do the main job of raising your bread. This is called “training.” You want to develop yeasts that are trained to thrive on the food you will feed them later, when making the dough. If you train your yeast for years to eat freshly ground whole spring wheat, then when you go to make bread with all-purpose bleached flour, it won't be nearly as efficient as it could be. So, the trick here is to simply use whatever flour or flours for your starter that you will use to make your bread.

1 Day one

Set aside 1000 g of the flour blend you will use for your bread. The starter food can be all-purpose flour, whole wheat, bread flour or a blend of all of them. Ideally, the flour blend for the starter will be the same flour that you will use to make your bread.

2 Start the starter

In a large glass jar (I use a 1 liter Weck jar), add 150 g warm water (about 90 °F / 32 °C and 150 g “food” from the flour blend. (You could use roughly equal parts.) Mix them together well with a spoon and let the starter sit on the counter, covered with cloth for a day.

3 Day two

Take off the covering and check the condition of the starter. Your starter will have developed fine bubbles within 24 hours. Probably. No worries if the starter has not begun to bubble. It may be too cold in your kitchen. Or, maybe the starter is slow to start due to the amount of natural yeast present in your bowl. Wait another 24 or even 48 hours and observe again.

4 Feed the starter

When you see that the starter has bubbles and seems active, dump all but 50 g of the starter. Add in 100g of the flour blend and 100 g of warm (about 90 °F / 32 °C) water. You will repeat this step several times over the next few days.

This part is easy and will be repeated several times.

Some folks say that you should transfer the starter to a new clean bowl with each feeding, but I have not found this to make a difference. The Modernist Bread team has done trials in this area as well and it appears their results are the same. I simply keep feeding the starter in my same Weck jar.

5 Feed the starter for the next five days

Repeat the feeding step—dumping out almost all the starter and feeding with new flour and water—every day.

You might notice that the starter will look a little quiet when you feed it, with liquid on top and maybe a bit of bubbling. However, after you feed the starter, it will rise again, feasting on the sugars in the flour, then falling as it runs low on food, loses momentum, and generate a high-acid environment. That is why you need to feed it each day.

By day seven, your sourdough starter will be ready to use. If you want the most sour and active sourdough starter, you can feed the start for 14 days.

6 Test the sourdough starter before you use it

If you have a bread recipe you love, you will see the terms levain, biga, or poolish in it. You can use your sourdough starter for these.

To make sure your sourdough starter is ready, use the float test. Simply spoon some starter onto cold water. If it floats above the surface, it is ready to use. If it sinks or sags beneath the surface, keep feeding it for another day or so to make it fully active.

7 One storage option—the refrigerator

This is the option you want to take if you think you will make bread again more than once every week.

Dump out all but 50 g of your starter, like you do for feeding and add in 100 g of the flour blend.

DO NOT ADD THE WATER.

You will the have a very dry, even chalky dough that you can keep sealed in the jar in the fridge for weeks without feeding it.

When you want to use the starter to make bread again, take it out of the refrigerator a couple of days before you want to bake. Feed the starter the same way for a couple of days to activate it again.

8 Another storage option—freeze it

Feed your starter. An hour after feeding it, pour it into ice cube trays. Put the tray into a plastic bag you can zip close. Freeze them.

Or, to save space, you can pop the individual cubes out when they are frozen and store the cubes in the bag in the freezer.

How to wake up your frozen starter

When you are ready to use the starter again, take a cube out of the freezer, add it to a clean jar, and start to feed it again. Add 100 g of warm (90 °F / 32 °C) water to the jar with the starter cube, let it thaw, and then mix it into the water thoroughly before adding 100 g of flour. Some starters may come back to life within hours. Some may need another feeding or two and a whole day to wake up. But this method will save the bulk of your flour for the bread, since you won't be feeding the starter every day.

Use the old dough

Professional bakers making sourdough and rustic breads will save a piece of dough from the day's batch and work it into the next day's batch. This is a form of levain, which French bakers call the chef. Keep this dough in the refrigerator and remove it when you are ready to mix the next day's batch of dough. (You can leave covered and allow to rest at room temperature for even more flavor development.) Using this method will result in dough that is easier to handle and bread that is more developed in crust, crumb texture, and flavor.