

In Pursuit of Good Sourdough

ANTH 411: Artisanal Food Project

Sam Wolfson

Autumn 2018

1 Ethnographic and Experiential Data

1.1 Process of Production

I spent many days this quarter baking sourdough bread. At this point I think I've exceeded 20 loaves, with varying levels of success. Sourdough is somewhat tempermental, and doesn't always work the way you expect it to, because you're working with living cultures. Sometimes the loaves come out sweeter; sometimes more sour. Sometimes they take longer to proof, and sometimes they proof too quickly. Some of the factors in sourdough baking can be regulated, but others—such as the composition of your starter—are much harder, if not impossible, to control. This can make it difficult for a bakery to consistently produce sourdough bread, as I will discuss later on. Personally, I have had pretty good luck with most of my attempts. I have documented each one on a website that I created specifically for that purpose, breadcrumbs.samwolfson.com.



Figure 1: Crust of my latest loaf.



Figure 2: “Crumb shot”

There are infinitely many variations on producing sourdough bread, and lots of people swear by their specific method, but the general process remains the same, and is quite accessible to the home baker.

1.1.1 Required Ingredients

The only required ingredients are flour, water, and salt.

1.1.2 The Starter

This is the life force of your sourdough baking process. It's the reason that this recipe doesn't require any store-bought yeast. The starter is simply a mix of flour and water that attracts natural yeast and bacteria from the air to colonize it. These microorganisms feed on the sugars in the flour and produce carbon dioxides, which inflate the bread, and acids, which activate enzymes in the wheat seeds and begin to break down the complex chemicals into simpler, more digestible compounds (Pollan, 437). The acids also create the signature sour taste that gives sourdough its name. Creating a starter from scratch requires patience, because it takes time to capture these bugs so that they take up residence in your flour-water mixture. But, once a starter has been "started," it can last indefinitely.

1.1.3 The Baking Process

It would be impossible to describe the specifics of each variation of sourdough baking. So I recommend researching strategies that have worked well for other people and adapting to your needs. A lot of this process is based on getting a good sense for how the dough should look and feel, and that requires practice. You can visit my website, bread-

crumbs.samwolfson.com, for lots of information on different baking strategies that I've had success with.

The one uniting step between every variation on sourdough is the combination and fermentation of flour, water, salt, and sourdough cultures. The flour and water mixture, either through kneading or through time, develops gluten, which gives it elasticity and allows bubbles to form inside the dough. At the same time, the bacteria and yeast are hard at work eating up the sugars in the flour and producing the carbon dioxide to fill those bubbles.

Most of the work of sourdough is done by the microorganisms. All you really need to do is move the process along every once in a while. Sourdough is a slow process, but requires very little active involvement. Therefore, there are recipes that can help you fit it into nearly any schedule.

1.2 Industrial Production

Sourdough is ill-suited to industrial production due to the intrinsically slow process of bacterial reproduction and the uncertainties involved in time required for fermentation. Baker's yeast, which contains just one variety of yeast, does much better industrially because of its consistency. I didn't find sourdough bread at the supermarkets in Rome where I shopped. But I've noticed that supermarkets here don't tend to have much bread in general; there are many *forni*, or bakeries, that seem to be the preferred way for people to buy bread.

1.3 Local Production

Not that many bakeries in Rome still use sourdough to produce their bread, though some grassroots movements have increased the number that use it for at least some of their products. I visited a bakery that still bakes sourdough, and learned that they face the same challenges that I do: namely, a significant amount of difficult-to-control variability between different batches of bread. The owner noted that some days they just don't have as much bread as other days, because the starter didn't work as well. The bakery is able to work around these challenges by producing other baked goods that don't rely on sourdough, and also maintaining a separate restaurant business. Running a business that relies solely on sourdough presents unique challenges that become more difficult—but not impossible—to solve at scale.

1.4 Personal Production

I believe that sourdough is a process that can be reclaimed by home cooks. Many people find bread intimidating because it takes so long, but most of the time doesn't require active involvement. When I baked, I estimate that the time I actually spent working with the dough usually amounted to less than an hour. The rest was just fermentation. Dough is pretty tolerant to small variations in time, so you can often adapt recipes to fit your schedule, instead of the other way around. I was relieved to discover that baking with sourdough ends up being more of an art than a science, much in the same way that Pollan describes when trying a new recipe:

I was surprised to discover that the recipe read nothing like code. Instead of a

precise set of instructions, he offered a fairly casual, open-ended set of guidelines. Sure, he specified how many grams of flour and water and starter to use, but after that, the recipe was more narrative than numbers. It left a lot up in the air. Robertson made ample allowance for the vagaries of weather and humidity, flour, and even one's personal schedule.

At first I wanted to treat my baking as a long-term science experiment, making tiny tweaks to a recipe and trying to observe an outcome. But with sourdough, “there are too many interests and variables in play” (Pollan, 551) to really expect that the single variable is the only part that actually changed.

The equipment required is minimal: all you really need is a mixing bowl, a clean work surface (such as a large cutting board or counter-top), and an oven. Having a pot with a lid that can fit in the oven will result in a better crust, but even that is non-essential. A dough scraper is also nice to have (and cheap—I picked one up for 5€) but not required. And of course the ingredients couldn’t be simpler: flour, water, and salt.

Understanding the process is much more valuable than having expensive tools, and this requires an acceptance that not every loaf will be perfect. You must “be able to think like a grass seed and, at the same time, like the community of yeasts and bacteria living in your sourdough culture” (Pollan, 551). Techniques for handling the dough, forming it into a loaf, and knowing how it should look and feel, take time to develop. To develop these skills, it’s important to “look at dough, and feel it, taste it, and smell it, almost continuously” (Pollan, 548).¹ As a baker, you must be “observant, flexible, and intuitive” (Pollan, 410). But the beauty of bread is that it’s extremely difficult to mess it up to the point where a bad-looking loaf won’t still taste good. And the only cost is relatively inexpensive flour.

¹I don’t necessarily endorse eating raw dough and raw starter, but I’ve personally done it and not experienced any ill effects.

As I mentioned before, I think sourdough is in a unique position of being extremely difficult to industrialize. So if home cooks and small artisan operations don't continue to invest their time into keeping it alive, it might die out completely. We can't rely on industry to keep the knowledge of sourdough alive, especially since each person has their own unique techniques that make it especially suited to their environment. The basic process of sourdough is simple. Flour, water, salt, and time. But what makes it interesting is all the ways that each baker does it differently. As Pollan puts it, "I've gotten fairly improvisational in my baking. I never look at recipes anymore." The knowledge of our senses—the intuition that we can't really write down, but rather, pass on by doing, experimenting, and showing—is something worth keeping around.

2 Sourdough Bread in Italian Culture

"In Italy, even something as simple as bread can change from one small town to the next" (Dickie, 38).

I couldn't find a quintessential type of "Italian" bread. As we've seen above, there are so many different strategies for sourdough breadmaking, even among individual bakers, that normalizing the process would be all but impossible. Of course, there are variations of sourdough specific to different regions in Italy. The best known variation is called *Altamura* bread, from the Bari province in southern Italy.

Altamura bread dates back to at least 37 BC, where the dough was traditionally mixed by women in their homes, and brought to communal ovens for baking. Altamura bread is notable for its long shelf life given by a thick crust and dryer crumb, which made it suitable

for farmers and herdsmen to eat while travelling or working in the fields. Stone ovens, heated by wood, are used for baking the bread, and they impart these long-lasting properties. Today the bread has DOP status, and can only be produced within the town of Altamura. It must be produced using local water, durum wheat flour from the surrounding areas, sea salt, and a piece of the *pasta madre*, or “mother dough” (i.e. the starter). It must be leavened for a specific period of time, and baked in wood-fired stone ovens.²

Altamura bread serves as a good example for an ancient sourdough tradition that has been preserved in modern times. This is the kind of food that would be sought out by the Slow Food movement, since it requires an “‘artisanal’ rather than ‘industrial’ production style” and foregrounds the “social relations of production” (Meneley, 171). In the case of Altamura, the “social relations” involve preparation of the dough by women at home, followed by baking in communal stove ovens in the specific manner described above. But, in this case, I don’t think the idea of “a product [being] tied to [a particular place]” (Meneley, 171) is beneficial to the promotion of sourdough as a whole. The “de-fetishism,” as Meneley puts it, doesn’t come so much from “being able to imagine the place of production” (Meneley, 166) as it does with olive oil. Rather, since I claim that homemade bread is accessible and low-investment to the average home chef, the “de-fetishism” can come from your own kitchen—from your personal involvement in the process. Moreover, sourdough is less vulnerable to the idea of “imagined cuisine” (Bestor, 85) than a product like olive oil because you know exactly how it was made; no need to trust the “saccharine, inaccurate, and boring” (Meneley, 167) accounts of other people to ensure that what you’re making is “authentic.” Authenticity,

²<https://www.fondazioneslowfood.com/en/slow-food-presidia/alta-murgia-traditional-bread/>
<http://www.weareitaly.net/en/product/Bread/puglia/pane-di-altamura-dop.html>
<https://www.deliciousitaly.com/puglia-food/altamura-bread-from-bari-province>
<http://www.panedialtamura.net/>

rather, comes from the fact that *you* made the bread yourself—not that it was sold to you with an idealistic label of those who produced it.

I understand that Altamura's DOP designation is important to protect its cultural heritage. However, because DOP is so restrictive, I don't think that Altamura is necessarily a stunning example of how to keep the tradition of sourdough alive **while continuing to develop it.** That, I believe, will come from the small bakeries, like *Santi Sebastiano E Valentino*, where I visited in Rome, that incorporates sourdough into their croissants; *Tartine* in San Francisco, where the baker Chad Robertson developed his new loaf; *Miller's Bake House*, a “one-man show” run by “an uncompromising baker, as fiercely devoted to whole grains and wet doughs and natural leavens as Richard Bourdon” (Pollan, 521); and of course, the home bakers like Pollan and myself, who are eager to try new flours and new techniques just for the satisfaction of watching the loaf spring up in the oven and tasting our newfound creations. Sourdough requires the passion and care of those willing to experiment on a small scale, to throw some ingredients together and hope that it works out, who are unburdened by the need for every loaf to be uniform and fast. These people are the ones that will need to take up the torch and keep the process alive into the future.

Afterword

To end on a positive note: the huge number of active Internet communities and forums, online videos, books, and blogs that I've explored as part of my project suggest that sourdough is experiencing a type of “renaissance” and that the art will not be lost anytime soon. (Or, perhaps it never really went away.)