



Sourdough the South Yeo way

What is sourdough?

Sourdough bread is made without the addition of specialist baker's yeast and relies instead on the naturally occurring yeasts found in flour. Baker's yeast has been developed so that it multiplies rapidly and inflates the dough rapidly, so bread can be baked in as little as 3 hours. In sourdough baking we have to wait for the much slower-acting natural yeasts to work, so the process can take from 8 to 24 hours.

So why bother?

Sourdough bread has a much more interesting flavour, a far chewier crumb and a better crust. It also keeps much better than conventionally-produced bread. And although the long period of time may sound daunting, it can actually be made to work in your favour as you can fit the various stages of the process around other tasks.

How to make it

Firstly, you need a starter. A starter is nothing more complicated than a mix of flour and water in which the natural yeasts have been allowed to ferment. The best way to create a starter is to find a friend who has some and pinch a bit...but if you have no friends (or none with some sourdough starter) then see the description at the end.

Making sourdough involves 5 stages:

1. Use your starter to create a batch of 'intermediate starter'
2. Mix the intermediate starter with more flour and water and add salt to create the 'production' batch. Knead well and leave to prove.
3. Knock back, shape into loaves and put into tins or proving baskets and leave to prove
4. Bake
5. Eat

Stage 1

Take your starter from the fridge where it's been sitting in a small, covered Tupperware.



Mix it with flour and blood-heat water to create a soft dough. The proportions are not critical, but I use 3-4 times the volume of flour to starter. I use 3 parts strong white flour to 1 part wholemeal. The amount of water is also not critical; you do not want a dry dough, but if it's a bit sloppy you just add less water in stage 2.



Cover with cling-film and leave what is now your intermediate starter in a warm place (an airing cupboard or near the Aga if you have one) for 3-4 hours.



Stage 2

At this point you must remember to take a bit of the intermediate starter and put it back in the fridge, ready for the next batch.



Now add the remainder to enough flour to create the desired number of loaves (I tend to make 4 at a time). If you add only a little flour to the starter it will rise more quickly but probably taste stronger. The more flour you add the longer it will take for the yeast to multiply. Remember to add salt at this stage. Add sufficient water to create a workable dough. Err on the side of wetness – you can always add more flour as you knead to tighten it up again. This is your production dough. Turn out onto a floured surface and knead vigorously for a good 10 minutes.



Put in a bowl and cover with cling film and leave to rise. You will find that the bread rises perfectly well at anything between fridge temperature and a very warm room, taking between 3 and 8 hours. I usually leave mine to rise overnight in the coldest place I can find. If you do use the fridge you will need to take it out and leave in a warm place before Stage 3.



Stage 3

Punch the dough to knock out the air, knead briefly then shape into loaves. You can cook them in tins, or for a classic sourdough use proving baskets.



Leave the loaves in a warm place to prove, during which time they will double in bulk. I find 1-2 hours is about right, but don't overdo it as the loaf can collapse.



Stage 4

Bake. If you have used proving baskets you will need to tip the loaves out onto a baking sheet. Cook in a hot oven.....we have an Aga which is as hot as it feels like on the day, so don't fret too much about the precise temperature. I give the loaves about 35 mins then turn them round as the back of the oven is hotter and give them another 10 mins.

Let the bread cool a bit, then eat a big slice (or two) with butter and homemade jam. Bread freezes well in airtight bags, so long as it's absolutely cold, but don't keep it frozen for more than a few weeks before eating.



Quantities

As a rough guide, a large finished loaf weighing 1 kilogram when it goes in the oven will require:

- 150g starter
- Add 200g flour and about 120 ml water for stage 1.
- At stage 2, take away 150g starter for the next batch and add 400g flour, 5-10g salt and 300ml water.

So Stage 1 triples the weight of the starter. After removing a bit, Stage 2 then triples the weight of the remainder again.

That pesky starter..

There are lots of really complicated descriptions of this process around, so I'll try to make this one simple. Basically, you're aiming to create a pot of flour and water with a good population of yeast cells and some of the acids (lactic, acetic, malic) which are a by-product of fermentation.

To do this, start with a small amount of flour and add warm water to create a paste. Cover and put in a warm place for a couple of days, by which time you should be able to see some bubbles forming. Now you have a mixture in which yeasts have started to multiply and the acids are present, but excessive acid will kill the yeast, so you need to dilute the mixture and feed it fresh flour from which the yeast can obtain the sugars it needs to multiply. Throw away (I know, it sounds daft) half the mixture and add rather more flour than the original quantity. Repeat the process daily for a further 3-5 days. You should now have a pot containing a mixture with discernible bubbles and a pleasant, slightly acidic smell reminiscent of malt vinegar, ready to use. If you take care of it, your starter could live a lifetime or more.