

All I Know About Sourdough (which is just the tip of the iceberg)

During this time of the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a lot of interest in sourdough bread which makes me super excited because I have been saying for at least a couple of years now ...sourdough bread is just REAL BREAD. It is the way bread was made before commercial yeast became available in 1938. Yeast is naturally found in the air, in our environment and it is believed that the ancient Egyptians happened upon it and its wondrous abilities to leaven dough quite by accident when meal and water were left out and fermented.

I just started on this adventure a couple of years ago so what I know is minimal – the tip of the iceberg – but I decided to share what I do know and help direct you to resources far more knowledgeable. Also, I thought you might like to hear the story of Father Abraham – my sourdough starter.

My sourdough starter (or levain) began with some information I gathered on the internet just like everyone else. I was very reticent about starting one but I decided to take the plunge. I learned a lot the first few months and am still learning.

Think of a sourdough starter as a living yeast. If you put a food source like flour plus water out and keep it open to room air it will attract yeast spores and some bacteria. The yeast will feed on the food source and grow (become active). When it is active it produces carbon dioxide and alcohol. It will continue to do this for about 12 hours and then slowly

extinguish its food source and become inactive or dormant. If it is not fed again for a long period of time it will die. But if you either feed it every day or keep it in the fridge so that its activity slows down (and feed it at least once a week) you can keep it alive perpetually.

You couldn't keep adding flour and water every week to your starter indefinitely – that would be impossible to maintain. So every time you feed it you need to discard some of it – cull the herd essentially. If you pull the starter out of your fridge after a week that starter is no longer active. So whatever you take out to discard before you refeed is inactive or “sourdough discard.” This can be used for many recipes that call for sourdough discard such as pancakes, muffins, biscuits and even cakes. Or it can be thrown away. But, if you refeed without discarding any of the starter first then all of that is active sourdough and can be used to bake sourdough bread. So you either cull the herd (discard) or have a cookout (sourdough bread) but you have to take some out each time you feed. Ok, that was a weird and gruesome analogy but hopefully it makes sense.

If you forget to feed your refrigerated starter for a couple of weeks the alcohol it produces begins to collect at the top and this is what is colloquially referred to as “hooch.” This does not necessarily mean that your starter has passed to the next realm. You can usually revive it by pouring off the hooch and giving it a couple of feedings back to back.

When it is active it behaves just like the commercial yeast you are used to using in your recipes but better. How better? Well, nutritionists and food experts say that human beings were meant to eat fermented foods; that our digestive tracts function better with the addition of fermented foods in our

diets. That is because fermented foods with live active cultures like yogurt or kombucha or kimchi populate our digestive tract with healthy bacteria that are essential for proper gastrointestinal functioning. Bread made from sourdough may no longer contain live cultures but the gluten is partially broken down or fermented by the yeast (before baking) and thus makes it easier for us to digest. Some experts and artisan bakers believe that gluten intolerance or sensitivity increased when we started moving away from traditionally made bread toward commercial products (during World War II; Michael Pollan's series "Cooked" explains this beautifully).

The sourdough starter is thus essentially your yeast source plus a small source of liquid and flour. If your starter is 100% hydrated (meaning you feed it equal parts water and flour) you can substitute it in a recipe by just replacing equal parts of flour and water in your recipe.

So, back to my original statement – sourdough bread is just "real bread." The sour taste is dependent on the length of fermentation. I bulk ferment and proof my bread for a total of 4 1/2 hours. Many choose to do a final proof of 12-13 hours which further enhances that sour taste. The longer you ferment the dough the more "sour" it will taste. But I really don't like that word because "sour" denotes something spoiled which sourdough bread isn't. This is just the word we have chosen to describe the "tangy" or sharp feeling we get in our mouths when we taste it. Actually, this sour taste is what causes salivation and begins the digestion process. You won't get that physical response from supermarket bread.

Peter Reinhart, the bread guru himself, said that yeast is a living thing that sacrifices itself to create this most basic

but most amazing thing for us, bread. I was so moved by my sourdough starter and these words that I named mine Abraham – the father of many sons.

I have included a couple of my youtube videos below showing how to use a sourdough starter to create a boule (or round loaf) and a batard (similar to a baguette).

Recipe to use for boule, batard or baguettes from King Arthur:
<https://www.kingarthurflour.com/recipes/naturally-leavened-sourdough-bread-recipe>

Some of the tools I use in breadmaking:

