

The Complete Guide to Sourdough Baking: From Starter to Perfect Loaf

Everything you need to know about making delicious sourdough bread at home - written in simple terms for beginners and experienced bakers alike.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Sourdough Baking

Sourdough bread is more than just a baking trend—it's an ancient art that combines science, patience, and a little bit of magic. Unlike regular bread that uses store-bought yeast, sourdough relies on wild yeast and good bacteria that you capture and grow yourself. This natural process gives sourdough its unique tangy flavor and chewy texture that keeps people coming back for more.

Why Choose Sourdough?

- **Natural Fermentation:** No commercial yeast needed—just flour, water, and time
- **Better Digestion:** The long fermentation breaks down gluten and makes nutrients easier to absorb
- **Amazing Flavor:** Complex, tangy taste that you can't get from quick-rise breads
- **Longer Shelf Life:** Natural acids help preserve the bread without additives
- **Satisfying Hobby:** Creating something from scratch is deeply rewarding

Chapter 2: Understanding Your Sourdough Starter

Your sourdough starter is the heart of every loaf. It's a living culture of wild yeast and friendly bacteria that work together to make your bread rise and develop flavor. Think of it as a pet that needs regular feeding and care.

Creating Your Starter

Day 1: Mix equal parts flour and water (50g each) in a clean jar

Days 2-7: Discard half, then add 50g flour and 50g water daily

Ready When: It doubles in size within 4-6 hours and passes the float test

Maintaining Your Starter

- **Room Temperature:** Feed daily with equal parts flour and water
- **Refrigerated:** Feed weekly; take out 12-24 hours before baking
- Always use clean utensils and filtered water for best results

Preparing Enough Starter for Your Recipe

Many recipes call for specific amounts of active starter. Here's how to feed your starter to have enough for baking PLUS some left over to maintain:

For 1 Cup of Starter (240g):

- **Feed with:** 125g flour + 125g water
- **Total after feeding:** About 300g (keeps 60g for next feeding)

For 1½ Cups of Starter (360g):

- **Feed with:** 185g flour + 185g water
- **Total after feeding:** About 430g (keeps 70g for next feeding)

For 2 Cups of Starter (480g):

- **Feed with:** 245g flour + 245g water
- **Total after feeding:** About 560g (keeps 80g for next feeding)

Pro Tip: Always feed your starter 6-12 hours before you plan to use it. It should double in size and pass the float test (a spoonful floats in water) when it's ready!

Chapter 3: Essential Ingredients & Equipment

Key Ingredients

1. Flour

- **Bread Flour:** High protein (12-14%) for chewy texture and good structure
- **All-Purpose:** Works well for beginners (10-12% protein)
- **Whole Wheat:** Adds nutrition and flavor; start with 10-20% of total flour
- **Rye:** Boosts fermentation and adds complex flavor

2. Water

- Use filtered or bottled water if your tap water has strong chlorine
- Room temperature water is best for consistent results

3. Salt

- Sea salt or kosher salt (avoid iodized table salt)
- Usually 2% of flour weight (10g salt for 500g flour)

Essential Equipment

- **Digital Scale:** Accuracy is key—always weigh ingredients
- **Large Mixing Bowl:** Glass or plastic for mixing and bulk fermentation
- **Bench Scraper:** For handling sticky dough
- **Proofing Basket (Banneton):** Helps dough hold shape during final rise
- **Dutch Oven:** Creates steam for crusty bread
- **Lame or Sharp Knife:** For scoring before baking

Chapter 4: Step-by-Step Baking Process

Step 1: Autolyse (30-60 minutes)

Mix flour and water until just combined. Cover and let rest. This helps gluten develop and makes the dough easier to work with.

Step 2: Add Starter and Salt

Add your active starter and salt to the dough. Mix by pinching and folding until well combined. The dough will be sticky—that's normal!

Step 3: Bulk Fermentation (4-6 hours)

During this time, perform stretch and folds every 30 minutes for the first 2 hours:

- Wet your hand, grab one side of dough
- Stretch up and fold over to opposite side
- Rotate bowl and repeat 4 times total
- Let rest between sets

Step 4: Pre-shape

Gently turn dough onto lightly floured surface. Shape into a loose round and let rest 20-30 minutes.

Step 5: Final Shaping

Shape into a tight boule (round) or batard (oval). Place seam-side up in banneton or bowl lined with floured towel.

Step 6: Final Proof

- **Room Temperature:** 3-4 hours

- **Cold Proof:** 8-24 hours in fridge (recommended for better flavor)

Step 7: Score and Bake

- Preheat Dutch oven to 475°F (245°C)
- Score dough with sharp blade
- Bake covered 20 minutes, then uncovered 20-25 minutes
- Cool at least 1 hour before slicing

Chapter 5: Timing Your Sourdough Bake

Planning your bake is crucial for success. Here's a sample timeline that you can adjust to fit your schedule:

Step	Time	Details
Feed Starter	6-12 hours before	Ensure starter doubles in size
Autolyse	30-60 minutes	Mix flour and water only
Add Starter & Salt	0 minutes	Mix until well combined
Bulk Fermentation	4-6 hours	Stretch & fold every 30 min
Pre-shape	20-30 minutes rest	Shape into loose round
Final Shape	After rest	Shape tightly, place in basket
Cold Proof	8-24 hours	In refrigerator
Score & Bake	40-45 minutes	475°F, covered then uncovered

Step	Time	Details
Cool	1+ hours	Before slicing

Chapter 6: Troubleshooting Common Problems

Don't worry if your first few loaves aren't perfect—every baker faces challenges. Here's how to fix the most common issues:

Problem 1: Dough Won't Rise

Causes & Solutions:

- **Weak Starter:** Feed more frequently until it doubles reliably in 4-6 hours
- **Too Cold:** Move to warmer spot (75-80°F) or use oven with light on
- **Wrong Flour:** Try mixing in some bread flour for better rise

Problem 2: Dense, Heavy Bread

Causes & Solutions:

- **Under-fermented:** Give bulk fermentation more time
- **Too Much Flour:** Work with wet hands instead of adding flour
- **Weak Gluten:** Do more stretch and folds during bulk fermentation

Problem 3: Crust Too Hard

Causes & Solutions:

- **Not Enough Steam:** Use Dutch oven or add water pan to oven

- **Over-baked:** Lower temperature by 25°F and watch color
- **Too Much Flour:** Use minimal dusting flour on surface

Problem 4: Bread Spreads Flat

Causes & Solutions:

- **Over-proofed:** Shorten bulk fermentation time
- **Poor Shaping:** Create more tension when shaping
- **Weak Structure:** Ensure proper gluten development

Problem 5: Gummy Interior

Causes & Solutions:

- **Under-baked:** Check internal temp reaches 205°F (96°C)
- **Cut Too Soon:** Wait at least 1 hour before slicing
- **Too Much Water:** Reduce hydration slightly next time

Chapter 7: Adding Flavors - Inclusions Guide

Take your sourdough to the next level by adding delicious mix-ins! The key is knowing when and how to add them without disrupting your dough.

When to Add Inclusions

The best time is during bulk fermentation, after the first hour. This ensures even distribution without breaking down the gluten too early.

How to Add Inclusions

1. Flatten dough into a rectangle
2. Sprinkle inclusions evenly over surface
3. Roll up like a cinnamon roll
4. Continue with stretch and folds to distribute

Popular Savory Inclusions

- **Cheese:** Sharp cheddar, Gruyère, or feta (50-100g)
- **Herbs:** Fresh rosemary, thyme, or everything bagel seasoning
- **Nuts/Seeds:** Walnuts, sunflower seeds, or pumpkin seeds
- **Mediterranean:** Olives, sun-dried tomatoes, roasted garlic

Popular Sweet Inclusions

- **Dried Fruit:** Cranberries, raisins, apricots, or dates
- **Chocolate:** Dark chocolate chips pair wonderfully with tangy sourdough
- **Cinnamon Sugar:** Creates delicious swirls throughout
- **Citrus:** Lemon or orange zest brightens the flavor

Pro Tips for Inclusions

- Use 10-20% of flour weight (50-100g for 500g flour recipe)
- Soak dried ingredients in warm water first
- Keep Dutch oven lid on longer to prevent burning

Chapter 8: Creative Uses for Sourdough Discard

Don't throw away your sourdough discard! It's perfect for quick recipes that don't need long fermentation. Here's how to use it wisely:

Best Ingredients to Pair with Discard

Leavening Agents (for lift)

- Baking powder & baking soda for pancakes and muffins
- Eggs for structure in waffles and quick breads
- A little yeast for pizza dough when you're in a hurry

Fats (for texture)

- Butter for flaky biscuits and tender cookies
- Olive oil for crackers and flatbreads
- Coconut oil for moist muffins and banana bread

Popular Discard Recipes

- **Pancakes & Waffles:** Mix discard with eggs, milk, and a bit of baking soda
- **Crackers:** Combine with olive oil, herbs, and roll thin
- **Pizza Dough:** Quick version with a touch of yeast
- **Banana Bread:** Adds tang to complement sweet bananas
- **Biscuits:** Flaky and tender with butter

Chapter 9: Pro Tips for Sourdough Success

These tips come from years of baking experience and will help you achieve bakery-quality results:

Temperature Control

- Keep dough at 75-80°F (24-27°C) for consistent fermentation
- Use a thermometer to check dough temperature
- Cold environments slow fermentation—adjust timing accordingly

Hydration Wisdom

- Start with 70% hydration (350g water to 500g flour)
- Higher hydration = more open crumb but harder to handle
- Adjust water based on your flour and climate

Timing Flexibility

- Watch the dough, not the clock
- Look for 50% size increase during bulk fermentation
- Poke test: Dough should spring back slowly when ready

Essential Reminders

- Always use a scale—baking by weight ensures consistency
- Keep detailed notes of what works
- Practice makes perfect—every loaf teaches you something
- Join sourdough communities online for support and tips
- Don't be afraid to experiment once you master the basics

Final Thoughts

Sourdough baking is a journey that rewards patience and practice. Each loaf you bake brings you closer to understanding your dough, your starter, and your own preferences. Don't get discouraged by early failures—even experienced bakers have off days!

Remember: the best sourdough is the one you enjoy making and eating. Whether you prefer a mild tang or a strong sour flavor, an open crumb or a tight texture, there's no single "right" way to make sourdough. Keep experimenting, keep learning, and most importantly, keep baking!

Happy baking! 

Did you find this guide helpful? Share it with your fellow bakers and let us know your sourdough success stories in the comments below!