

Care and Feeding a Sourdough Starter

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January 5, 2021

Congratulations. You are now the owner and protector of a sourdough starter. Now what?

I encourage you to think about this process like watering a plant - many sources will tell you that you **MUST** feed your sourdough every X days to avoid tragedy. I have personally gone against just about every recommendation out there, and kept my starters kicking.

So, basically: you are now the proud parent of a lovely sourdough culture. As a colony of bacteria and yeast, it needs water, a healthy dose of aeration, and flour every now and again to live a happy and productive life. You can slow down its consumption needs by giving it fridge time (this is where mine spend 98% of their lives) and wake it back up by bringing it up to room temperature and giving it a good feed.

I have always fed my starters at a 3:2 ratio of flour:water. At this point, I don't really measure at all any more - exact ratio is not crucial so much as 3:2 is easy to remember while you're getting a feel for it! Some folks keep an almost entirely liquid starter, but 3:2 will definitely put you more on the solid end. I feed my starter when I'm about to bake with it (every 1-3 weeks) and sometimes even if I'm not going to bake just because it's been a while (>1 month). The bottom line? It's pretty hard to kill a sourdough culture - just pour the weird juice off the top, ignore any color change that doesn't look like mold (it's not uncommon for the surface of the starter to turn black-ish after a long period without use) and feed and divide. The biggest thing you'll notice with a starter that hasn't been fed in a long time is that it won't be all that 'happy', in that the lactobacili may be much more active than the yeast. It will smell sour, but you won't see many bubbles forming, or much 'lift' if you bake with it in that state. Fortunately, it's easy to cure by keeping the starter at room temperature and feeding (potentially throwing away half each time if you don't plan to bake so you don't end up with an obscene amount of starter) for a few days, or perhaps a week.

I recommend you feed it more regularly at the beginning to get a feel for your starter, at least once a week even if you aren't baking with it. Smell it, taste it, use your powers of observation to get to know it!

To feed your starter (as if you are going to make bread with it), I've laid out a potential schedule below. It will all vary, of course, with the temperature, how 'happy' your starter is, and what times of day work for you - because you can and should make baking work around your schedule, as opposed to letting it dictate your day. The more comfortable you get with your yeasties and beasties, the easier it will be to make timing work!

- Morning 1 - Feed starter in jar.
 - Add 2/3 cup of warm water (65-80 degrees, use warmer water if you've just taken the starter out of the fridge) to jar and shake vigorously until well combined. Use knife or chopsticks or a fork or your hands to break up any big chunks of starter.
 - Add 1 cup of bread flour (AP flour will work if it's all you have!). Use any combination of white and whole wheat, but I don't recommend low gluten options like rye, buckwheat, or pastry flour at this stage.
 - Cover jar LOOSELY (or it may blow the top off) and place on a plate to catch any drips. If your starter is happy, you should see bubbles and be able to watch it grow over the next 6-12 hours. If it's not so happy, this step may take longer before you see any action.
**If you don't want to bake, stop here! Wait for the majority of the growth to happen, put the lid on tightly, and stick it back in the fridge. Burp it once or twice in the next day if it still seems to be growing.
- Evening 1 - Feed again to create enough 'mature starter' or levain or whatever your recipe calls for.

- Dump your starter out of your jar into a bigger bowl than you think you'll need.
- Fill the jar with 1 cup warm water (feel free to double or halve or whatever you need to with the 3:2 ratio to get the amount you want, or feed in the recommended quantities your recipe provides), shake vigorously to clean up the straggler starter in the jar, and dump into your bowl.
- Mix warm water and existing starter until combined. Use a whisk, a wooden spoon, or my personal favorite - your hand!
- Add flour in accordance with the amount of water you used, so 1.5 cups of flour in this case. Incorporate fully.
- **The most important step - put some starter back in the jar for next time!** I like to keep about a cup of starter in the fridge, and I like to take it out and put it in the jar immediately after this step so I don't forget later on. I then let the jar sit out overnight (as described above) and put it in the fridge the next morning.
- Cover the bowl with something mostly airtight (saran wrap, a plastic grocery bag, put a plate on top - doesn't have to be a perfect seal), and let the yeasties and beasties feast!
- Morning 2 - Put your reserved starter jar back in the fridge, and use the rest of your starter as directed in your recipe!

Part 2: Recipes + Resources

- The Perfect Loaf (thepperfectloaf.com) is a bread nerd's joy, but you'll need a scale to follow his recipes.
 - [Sourdough Starter Maintenance Routine](#) - a much more thorough version of what I've described above.
 - [Beginner's Sourdough Bread](#) - worth a read through for sourdough basics, terminology, and a recipe that maybe isn't so 'beginner' after all. Great pictures of how your bread + starter should look at various stages are worth a scroll, at the very least!
 - [Simple Weekday Sourdough Bread](#) - This is a version of the no-knead bread that I use as my base recipe and which you've had before! Worth reading if only for the 'schedule' of a no-knead bread, even if you don't want to get into baker's percentages or, owning a scale.
 - [Tartine Country Loaf](#) - Here's TPL's version of the Tartine recipe I use.
- The Clever Carrot <https://www.theclevercarrot.com/2014/01/sourdough-bread-a-beginners-guide/>
- You got a lucky starter: it's my dad's pet project, and he knows a LOT about it. Please visit ericpallant.com to add your starter to his mapping project, learn some of its history/the [history of bread in general](#) and see a bunch of photos of my dad looking really proud while holding bread.

My favorite part is that, once you get a feel for your starter and the process, you totally don't need a recipe any more - just a general awareness of ratios and what it should look like at a given stage.

Thank you for reading my ramblings. I hope it's digestible. Clearly this is a family love/passion project/life philosophy, and my pops would be more than happy to nerd out with any of you on any aspect of bread. He actually wrote a book on it, [Sourdough Culture](#), and knows so much more than I do about every aspect of bread. Please let me know what other resources you might like, or if I can clarify anything. Basically - it's more of an art than a science in terms of keeping your starter alive, and the rest is just percentages and patience and a little bit of wonder.

Enjoy.