



g r o w

Stoneground Sourdough Matthew Ness

So you've decided that you want to try your hand at making some sourdough bread.

Well the first step is making a viable starter culture that becomes the base of all your future sourdough breads. It sounds like a daunting task, but really it's a very quick, simple, nurturing task that deeply connects your body, heart, and soul to each loaf.

The simplest way I know how to explain a sourdough starter is this: equal parts flour and water, left to ferment in a controlled environment to catch airborne bacteria and develop wild yeast that can be harnessed to leaven baked goods. Simple enough right?

So now that we know WHAT it is let's delve a bit deeper into the how's and the why's:

I tend to treat my sourdough starters like young children. All they truly need to survive are the basic necessities of life: food, water and warm shelter. The food comes from the flour, more specifically the sugars, proteins and nutrients found in flour which become a feast for all those wild yeast microbes. The water comes from, well, the water, a necessary ingredient for all living creatures. And the shelter comes in the form of whatever clean glass jar, metal bowl, or plastic tub with a fitting lid you chose to house yours in. The warmth in this equation comes from both the temperature of the water used and the ambient temperature surrounding your starter's shelter. The ideal location for your starter is somewhere in your kitchen (because that's where you're going to be making the bread!) but it needs to be relatively warm, so I typically find that the top of the fridge is a perfect place. The compressors from fridges run frequently and give off heat which rises up and elevates the ambient temperature of that area. Pick whichever spot works best for you, but you're looking for something between 24 and 26 degrees Celsius / 75 and 79 degrees Fahrenheit, the zone that our wild yeast is at its happiest. If you can accurately get your water to that same temperature, do so.

And like children, they require a little bit of your daily attention. You need to take just a moment each day and observe your starter's behavior. Note its growth, its aroma, its bubbles, and make adjustments accordingly. This is how you will maximize flavor and fermentation in your loaves as you strive toward that perfect slice of homemade sourdough. And then it's just a matter of feeding it every day to keep it going, so let's jump into what you need to make that happen.

Here's a list of everything you will need before we get started:

- Flour
- Water
- Digital Scale
- Rubber Spatula
- A glass jar with a fitting lid
- Quick Read Thermometer

For the flour, use whichever kind you would like / have access to! It's worth noting that using as fresh and as local flour as possible is always the best option for flavor. Whole grains like rye, spelt, and wheat make the best, and most active starters because they have been processed the least and therefore have more germ, bran, and nutrients to help feed your hungry starter. I try and refrain from using bleached flours as well as any flour from those "run of the mill" (that's a bread pun!) big flour companies because they are typically denatured of nutrients and enzymes that your starter would otherwise benefit from.

99% of the time the water used can be as simple as tap water, but depending on where you live you might want to let your water sit out in an open container on the counter for about 24 hours due to the amount of chlorine or fluoride that your municipality uses in their water. This process allows most, if not all of that to evaporate so that it will not impede your starters' growth. Some people prefer to use bottled water for peace of mind, but for me (and pretty much every other baker that I know) it's just good old fashioned tap water.

That's it for ingredients, just flour and water! The other things on this list are equipment and based on what you have available to you they are not all "necessary" but more of a guideline for what I recommend. I prefer digital scales and thermometers for weighing and measuring for their speed, accuracy and ease of use, but if you only have more old fashioned equipment there's nothing wrong with using that as long as you use it correctly. I prefer using rubber spatulas for stirring the starter because they are easiest to clean and are not porous so they are less likely to harbor any unwanted ingredients or bacteria that we don't want in our starter.

Now that we have all of our ingredients, tools and equipment and basic knowledge ready, let's get our starter going! The sooner we start it, the sooner we can make bread like you've never had before.

Day 1:

Take your clean, empty glass jar and weigh it (without lid) on your scale in grams. Grab a permanent marker and write the weight on the bottom of your jar or a piece of tape on the side, or a piece of paper, just write it down. Knowing this number will help us with the following day's feedings.

In your jar place 50 g of your flour of choice (I use locally-, freshly-milled, organic whole-grain rye), and 50 g of room temperature water. Mix with your spatula until all of the flour is absorbed into the water and you have a shaggy paste, it only takes about 30 - 60 seconds to mix. Place your lid on upside down or lightly screw on the screw top, and place in a warm spot in your house. Leave it for 24 hours.

Day 2:

Observe your starter. Chances are that not a lot has happened quite yet. It's only been a day so be patient, it's more of a slow build than an overnight miracle! Open your jar, smell it. Note what it smells like.

Discard 50 g of your starter. At this point you should have roughly 100g of starter, so we're going to throw out half of it. Remember when I asked you to note the weight of your container? That's what makes this step so easy. If your container is 200 g and you weigh it with your starter and it reads 300 g that means you have 200g of container and 100 g of starter. So throw out half of it, and then feed your 50 g of starter it with 50 g of fresh flour and 50 g of water. This is a 1:1:1 ratio of starter, flour and water. Also what's known as a 100% hydration starter. Place your lid on upside down, lightly screw on the screw top, and place in a warm spot in your house. Leave it for another 24 hours.

Day 3:

Repeat process for day two every day, discarding a portion of your starter and feeding it a 1:1:1 ratio of starter, flour and water. We are going to repeat this step for another 7 days (for a total of 9-10 days including day you mixed your starter).

Each day observe the activity, the liquidity or viscosity, and the aroma of your starter. Change your container if it's getting too dirty or crusty. Every day you should notice more and more tang or sourness developing. Scents like ripe banana, apple cider and even some light "chemical" notes are all good, positive signs that your starter is on the right path.

After about 7-10 days you will have a viable sourdough starter that will be primed and ready to make fresh, homemade sourdough bread. Follow this daily feeding regimen to maintain a healthy starter. If you are not baking for a period of time you can place your starter in a tightly sealed container in the fridge. This process lulls the yeast to sleep where it is dormant and inactive. Whenever you decide you want to make another loaf or two, pull it out a couple days ahead of time and feed it once a day for 2-3 days to bring it back up to its peak activity level. You may see a small amount of liquid on top of your starter from the fridge, this is normal and just stir it back in, no big deal.

That's pretty much all the information you need to get your sourdough starter going, so have fun keeping it alive. Try making different starters with different types of flour! If you like heavy, dense rye breads, use rye flour. If you're looking to make whole wheat breads, use whole wheat or a mix of whole wheat and white flour. If your goal is baguettes, ciabattas and focaccia then stick with a straight white bread flour starter. But the most important thing is to not take it too seriously and enjoy this life giving, mothering, nurturing process of starting something that is truly your own. I saw a meme recently that said sourdough starters are like modern day Tamagotchi's for millennials, and I couldn't agree more! Keep it fed and happy and it will keep you fed and happy! In the future we're going to get into the basics of making your first actual loaf of bread and that's where all the real fun begins. In the meantime, start experimenting on your own!

Thanks for joining and have fun!