

Heavitree Sourdough Starter

This starter was collected in Exeter, where we have an abundance of airborne microbes. I was alerted to this by the fact our bathroom grouting rapidly turns pink.

It is the most easy going, dare I say it - bouncy - starter I have ever had. I recommend keeping it going with bottled water (because over time you get a build-up of chlorine from tap water) and organic flour - for similar reasons.

NORMAL MAINTENANCE OF STARTER

If you are making sourdough regularly, feed the starter every 24 hours.

Put $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of plain flour in a clean jar or container, add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of water and $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of starter. (Doing it in this order minimises washing up.) Stir with a wooden spoon until no dry flour remains. Cover loosely with lid or cling film. If you are using a transparent container, you can mark the level (e.g. with a sticky label) to observe how much the starter expands.

Voilà! Your starter is refreshed. Leave it at room temperature till the next day.

Throw away remaining starter. I found it was turning my U bend black, so I scrape it into the bin and wash out the dirty container rather than putting the gunk down the sink.

GIVING YOUR STARTER A HOLIDAY

After 'refreshing' your starter, leave it to expand for 5-12 hours. Once it is doubled in size, put it in the fridge, loosely covered and labelled with the date.

Once a week, remove the starter, refresh in the normal way, allow to expand (it will take a bit longer because it has been chillaxing - 12-18 hours perhaps) and refrigerate again till next week.

REVIVING YOUR STARTER

When your starter has been on holiday, it can take two or three days to restore it to its full vavoom. To do this, simply refresh it twice a day, rather than once a day. It should soon bounce back.

If at any time your starter seems dozy or stops expanding properly, you can perk it up by refreshing it with strong flour, or even a half-and-half mix of strong and wholemeal flour (higher protein for the microbes to feed on).

If your starter starts looking wet, simply add an extra tbs of flour till it is back to desired sponginess. If it goes black or red or smells peculiar, throw it away.

BEFORE BAKING

The day before baking, I like to give an extra feed. For instance, I normally feed my starter in the evening, so the day before baking, I give it an extra (morning) feed.

THE EASIEST SOURDOUGH LOAF

These instructions seem very elaborate, but the procedure is actually very simple, and I don't think there's an easier sourdough loaf out there. I've set this out as a sort of timetable, but timings are very flexible.

THURSDAY EVENING

Refresh your starter in the usual way.

FRIDAY MORNING

Give your starter an extra refresh.

FRIDAY EARLY EVENING

Tip 520g strong (or very strong) white flour into a bowl and whisk in $\frac{3}{4}$ tsp of fine salt.

Take a large mixing bowl (glass is great) and pour in 10oz (that's 10oz by weight) room temperature bottled water. Now scoop in 3oz (again, by weight) of your starter, which will be gloopy and should with any luck float. (Set the remaining starter aside.) Whisk the water and starter together till frothy and tip in the flour mixture.

Use a wooden spoon to mix the flour and water until no dry flour remains. I usually have to splash in approx 1tbsp (bottled) water to gather up all the flour. Stir it about till it is a shaggy mess, then get one hand in and knead it in the bowl for 15-30 seconds, till it has come together into a shaggy, uneven ball. Leaving it into bowl, cover tightly with clingfilm and leave at room temperature overnight (12-18 hours).

NOTE The proportion of flour to water at this stage is critical. Trust me on this: do not add any more water than is necessary to gather up the flour in the bowl - if you do your loaf will spread and flop. The mixture is meant to be 'shaggy' and unpromising. On the other hand, there should be no dry flour; if there is, you haven't added enough water. Flour varies - extra strong flour needs a splash more water, less strong flours might not need any extra water at all, so you have to go by touch and look.

Take $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the remaining starter (which is pretty much all that will be left) and refresh it in the usual way; you can keep refreshing it daily, or give it a holiday by putting it in the fridge in the morning, as you wish.

SATURDAY MORNING

If you have a glass bowl, you will wake up to find your dough is lovely and bubbly. Let it continue to rise until doubled in size - I give it 15-18 hours total.

Prepare to bake. I do this in a battered Le Creuset. Put a sheet of lightly oiled baking paper in the bottom.

Turn out the extremely sticky dough onto a lightly floured surface and flour your hands. Knead it 10-15 times (only) till smooth (but still very sticky). Gather into a ball and pull the

dough round itself to make a tight smooth surface. Place (seam-side down) into the Le Creuset. Cover tightly with cling film. Put in a cold oven. Put at the bottom of the oven a shallow baking tin and pour in 3 cups of boiling water. Close oven door. This creates a controlled steamy environment. I suppose you could let the dough rise at room temperature but it would take longer.

SATURDAY EARLY AFTERNOON

After 2 hours, take a peek and see if the bread has risen. I usually give it 2 ½ to 3 hours total. (If it has slumped and spread, well, I did tell you not to add too much water - add less next time. You can still bake it and it will taste great, but it won't look great.)

Remove cling film, sprinkle the dough lightly with flour and slash ¼ inch deep with your sharpest knife, a Stanley knife or razor blade.

Put on the lid and place Le Creuset in oven. Turn oven to 230 fan and start timer (immediately) to 35 minutes.

After 35 minutes, carefully remove lid. Bake 10 minutes longer. At this point, I usually hoik the loaf out (using the baking paper 'ears' to lift) onto a hot baking sheet and put back in the oven for 4 minutes, rotate it, then back in the oven for 4 minutes more. Total baking time from turning on the oven = 51 minutes.

Cool completely on a wire rack. This bread keeps very well.