



Photos by David Mayes

Sourdough bread loaves at the K-State bakery science facility. Aaron Clanton, a K-State professor in grain science and industry, said people have been seeking out simpler and more traditional processes, like sourdough, which is why it's become popular.

Sourdough on the rise

How to use an ancient form of baking that's having a moment

By Savannah Rattanavong

When the country seemingly shut down in the spring to curb the spread of you-know-what, and people began to self-quarantine in their homes, many sought out hobbies.

For some, that meant busting out the flour and yeast to bake bread and other goodies. While the world around us may feel like it's on fire, a more intentional heat is stoking ovens at home.

"With everybody needing to quarantine and isolate and whatnot, I think people are finding that love for baking again," said Aaron Clanton, a K-State professor in grain science and industry. "I think there's been an interest

by consumers in general for sourdough because it kind of ties into the trend of people turning to more simpler and traditional processes."

Sourdough, one of the oldest forms of leavening, or lifting, bread, has been around for ages. Historians haven't settled on how long exactly, but the oldest recorded use of sourdough dates back to Ancient Egypt.

"Sourdough' is most often a thick batter of wheat or rye flour stirred with water," said Sharon Davis, a writer and teacher for Home Baking Association. "Started in a warm environment, (it) starts growth of natural yeast that's both airborne and found on the grain and in flour. Yeast 'buds' as it ferments. (Carbon dioxide) gas escaping makes the

bubbles that leaven the dough."

Starting a sourdough isn't complicated, but it does require time and patience. The longer you "feed" the dough, i.e. adding water and flour, the more flavorful and tangy the flavor will become. Some dedicated bakers have fed their sourdough for years, even.

"The challenge with sourdough is you basically have to start a starter," Clanton said. "You can do that from scratch, but it's not really going to develop the flavor or the gassing power unless you continue to feed it in regular intervals over a period of time. What you're doing is you're basically establishing a culture of wild yeast and bacteria. ... When you add fresh flour and water to it, what you're doing is adding oxygen and you're



Clanton loads sourdough bread onto cooling racks at K-State.

giving fresh flour, which is fresh food for the microorganism, and that kind of rejuvenates it.”

No matter where you're at in your baking journey, Clanton and Davis shared a few extra tips to mind when recreating the process at home and baking a delicious, golden loaf of bread.

Mind the temperature

Prepare the starter dough at room temperature and keep it in a covered container, though not airtight so it can allow in oxygen. Warmer temperatures help cultures develop a bit quicker. Many people who aren't actively baking sourdough bread often store

their dough in the fridge. This slows down the fermenting process, but you wouldn't have to feed it as often.

Set a feeding schedule

If you're intending to make bread as soon as you can, Clanton said to feed the starter twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening. At this rate, you should have it ready enough to bake with in about a week. If you're just maintaining it, store it in the fridge and feed it once or twice a week.

“Put it in your calendar to feed the starter weekly, even if you don't bake with it,” Davis added.

Steam for a crispy crust

A drawback of home ovens in this particular case is that unlike some commercial ovens, they don't have an easy way of injecting steam during the baking process to help bread develop crisp, outer layers.

Clanton said one method an at-home

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baker can try is to spray water on the dough's surface just before putting it in the oven. Another option he said he's had more regular success with is letting a baking dish or pan preheat in the oven on the bottom rack and pouring boiling water in it before inserting the dough. Both processes will create steam.

Trust the process

"History's on your side with sourdough," Davis said. "Go back 150 years and there were no commercial yeast companies, only sourdough starters. Even cake was leavened with eggs and sourdough starter. If millions of ancestors succeeded, so can you."

RECIPES

Natural Yeast Sourdough Starter

Ingredients

1 cup (4 ounces, 115 grams) whole wheat flour

You also can add 1/2 teaspoon of commercial yeast to have bubbles form quicker

1/2 cup (4 ounces, 115 grams) 70 to 85 degrees water (filtered or non-chlorinated preferred)

Instructions

Mix with a fork until smooth and transfer to a large (1 quart or larger) glass jar or container with a sealable lid for refrigerator storage. Be mindful of using spotless containers and utensils.

Day 1: Cover loosely with waxed paper or cheese cloth in a warm (75 to 85 degrees), draft-free place.

Day 2: Bubbles may be forming, or not — don't worry. Continue another 24 hours.

Day 3: Start feeding by removing about half the starter in the jar. What's "discarded" can be used in pancakes, scones, doughnuts,

cakes, quick breads and more. Mix in scant 1 cup (4 ounces, 115 grams) unbleached all-purpose flour and 1/2 cup (4 ounces, 115 grams) room temperature water, stirring until smooth. The starter mixture will be thick. You may add 1 tablespoon water if too hard to stir. Cover loosely and let rest 24 more hours.

Days 4, 5 and 6: Repeat the feeding and discarding process by watching the starter rise and bubbles form. When the starter falls, feed again as Day 3 directs.

Day 7: Starter is ready to use when spongy and light. It will have an alcohol smell and a layer of liquid. In the old days, it was called "hooch."

Ready test: A teaspoon of starter floats to the surface of a glass of water. If it doesn't pass this test, just keep feeding the starter as directed on Day 3 until it floats.

Long-term care and feeding: Continue to discard or use half and feed the other half of the starter every week. If you forget to feed on schedule, discard half and feed, and it will likely rejuvenate. The clear liquid that forms also can be stirred back into the starter when it's fed.

Sourdough Bread

Makes 1 loaf — may be doubled

Ingredients

1 cup (8 ounces, 225 grams) ripe (fed) sourdough starter

1 1/2 cups (12 ounces) lukewarm (90 degrees) water, preferably filtered, non-chlorinated

5 cups (1 pound and 4 ounces, 600 grams) unbleached all-purpose flour (may be part whole wheat flour)

2 1/4 teaspoons salt

Optional: 1 teaspoon dry yeast

Instructions

Mix all the ingredients together, reserving 1/2 cup flour to sprinkle dough as you knead. Knead until dough is smooth, about 5 minutes.

Place in a large, oiled bowl, cover loosely with waxed paper and

allow to rise at room temperature (70 to 75 degrees), draft-free, until doubled in size (8 to 12 hours).

Divide dough in half and shape into two round, oval or oblong loaves. (If sticky, use wet hands and handle dough quickly). Place on greased or parchment-lined sheet pan; two, greased medium loaf pans; or oven-safe bowls. Cover with barely-damp flour sack or linen towel. Allow to

double, about 1 1/2 hours, in a warm (no warmer than 100 degrees) draft-free place. Heat oven to 425 degrees. Make 2 or 3 slashes across oblong or round loaves. Spritz loaves with water in first 15 minutes of baking for a deeper crust. Bake 30 to 35 minutes or until very golden (195 to 200 degrees) at center. Remove from pan to cooling rack. Cool before slicing or storing.



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