

DON'T FEAR THE STARTER

a laid back approach to sourdough
baking by Avery Flinders

this zine was made on the stolen lands of Wurundjuri
and Wathaurung peoples.

it was also made using Electric Zine Maker
<https://alienmelon.itch.io/electric-zine-maker>

you can find me at twitter @averyflinders or
chickencollective.storenvy.com or that personal website
im gonna finish soon.

fahrenheit users have to do their own temp conversions
and im not sorry.

so here's my deal. i worked at a commercial bakery for 8 years while i was at uni. then i quit and didn't bake at all for four years. i forgot half of what i used to do at the bakery, and the other half didn't really work in home baking because the scale was too different. then i started doing sourdough at home in a way that was about as different as you can get from commercial baking.

now there is a quarantine and people are talking about sourdough a lot, like, A LOT, and there's lots of advice with all this detail about EXACT MEASUREMENTS and TIMING and shit and it makes people even more afraid of yeast than they already are and i want to say, folks, it's ok. yeast isn't fragile and sourdough doesn't have to be like staring into the abyss.

so here is a way to make sourdough and be chill about it.

perfect bread is a lot of hard
work. tasty bread is not.

if your goal is to make perfect bread
then by all means, go to one of those
guides that talks about the results
you get from different hydration
ratios and weighing your salt.
perfect bread, if it exists, probably
requires that kind of precision.

tasty bread, on the other hand, does
not. tasty bread mostly requires
flour+salt+water+yeast, rising time,
baking until it's dried out

oh, and the willingness to make some
bad loaves while you figure it out.
the willingness to look at your risen
dough and think "is this right, i
don't know if it's supposed to bubble
like that" and put it in the oven
anyway.

things to know about starters

a 'starter' is a colony of living yeast, reproducing and farting carbon dioxide in a mixture of flour and water. You feed the starter more flour and water to make it bigger, and take some (BUT NEVER ALL) of it out to leaven a loaf of bread instead of using instant yeast.

So first you need to obtain a starter. There are two ways:

1. get some from a friend who already has a starter. boom, you can start baking.

2. make a slurry of flour and water, keep it somewhere in your house, add more flour and water every day until some wild yeast colonises it. (there are ways to speed this up by introducing ingredients that carry a lot of wild yeast but that's too much to go into here.)

i like the 'get it from a friend' method because it's faster, the yeast is already at a stage where it's ready for baking I just like that i'm baking bread with the same yeast someone else baked with, and they got it from someone else. it's a little bit of connection with other people.

anyway, some people keep starter in a dough-like state and others keep it as a batter. I've only ever used a more batter-y starter so I dunno how the doughy ones work. I keep mine in a jar in the fridge and just take it out when I'm getting it ready to bake.

when you've got your starter at room temp, make sure to feed it every day. it probably won't die if you forget a day, but it might get weird.

There are lots of ways starter can get weird, but I've found it very hard to kill. I've had mine since 2014 and thought I wrecked it many times. But if you decant it into a new container while you wash its usual one and feed it for a few days it will almost always come good again.

how i make it into bread

step 0, cold weather only:
about 36 hours before bread time, take the starter out of the fridge and feed it 1/2 cup flour and enough water to make it a batter again. Leave in the kitchen.

step 1: about 24 hours before bread time, take a big bowl and add 1 cup starter, 1 cup flour and enough water to bring it back to a batter-like consistency. cover and leave on a bench.

step 2: 12 hours before bread time, add 3 more cups of flour, about 2 tsp salt and like a cup and a half of water, maybe. (i stick it under the tap until it looks like enough water but this takes practice) mix. add more water until the mixture is thick, but pourable. cover and leave on a bench again.

how i make it into bread cont.

3. bread time. heat your oven to 200-220 degrees C. while it's heating, grease a loaf tin all over with oil and scrape your bowl o dough into it. once the oven has reached temp, put the loaf in.

4 (optional) five minutes in, I open the oven and score the top of the bread with a knife. you don't have to do this but if you don't, the crust will crack at some random spot as it expands.

5. after about 20 minutes, turn the oven down to 160 degrees and bake for another 50-60 minutes.

6. when enough time has elapsed, check your loaf by taking it out of the oven and shaking it until it comes away from the sides. if it doesn't do this after 30 seconds of vigorous shaking, put it back and check again in 10 mins.

7. if the bread comes out of the tin, tap the bottom. if it sounds hollow, you're done! enjoy.

some final tips

i hear a lot about how baking is all about precision. i think this is more true of pastry and cakes than bread. yeast is a living thing, it reacts differently in different temperatures and humidities, and i think being good at bread is about experience. it's about baking enough bread that you can interpret the look and smell and feel of a rising dough and know whether it needs more rising time or more flour. there's no shortcut to that, you just gotta bake a lot of bread.

you'll notice mine is a no-knead method. i actually like kneading, but i find sourdough does better without it, even if you go with a stiff dough rather than a pourable one. kneading can bust the carbon dioxide bubbles your yeast has been hard at work on. if you want a stiffer dough, give it another good long rise after you shape it.

once you've baked a few loaves your method may end up totally different to mine as you learn. this is good and right and one of the best things about sourdough. happy baking.