5.25" x 12"

SAN FRANCISCO SOURDOUGH BREAD

agrarian
WILLIAMS-SONOMA

As with any art, the process of creating the perfect loaf of San Francisco sourdough bread varies from person to person. Slight adjustments to your technique over time, such as the type of flour you use or the precise temperature of the water, will help you find the recipe that works best in tandem with your unique kitchen environment, your oven and your individual taste.
When preparing the starter as instructed below, use all-purpose white flour or bread flour.

ACTIVATION:

In a medium mixing bowl, stir together 1 cup (250ml) tap or bottled water (75° to 85°F/24° to 29°C) and 1 cup (155g) flour. (Note: Never add anything other than flour and water to your sourdough starter.) Add the contents of your San Francisco Sourdough Starter package, stir and cover with a kitchen towel. Keep this mixture between 75° and 85°F (24° and 32°C) to allow the cultures to thrive.

If your room temperature is cooler than 75°F (24°C), turn on the light in your oven and place the starter mixture inside. Or, turn the oven on to for a minute or two and turn it off, then place the mixture in the oven. Use an instant-read thermometer to ensure that the proper temperature of the starter is achieved. Do not expose your starter to temperatures above 90°F (32°C). If using the oven for proofing, keep the thermometer in the oven and check the temperature often—the temperature is vital to the success of the project.

Frequent stirring expedites the fermentation process, so stir the mixture as often as you wish. You will begin to see tiny bubbles somewhere between 4 and 12 hours after adding the starter package to the flour and water. When you see these bubbles (or even if you don't and 12 hours have passed), add 2 cups (315g) flour and 2 cups (500ml) water (75° to 85°F/24° to 29°C) to the mixture and stir.

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Continue to stir every 30 to 60 minutes. Over time the consistency of the mixture will change, becoming thicker and more cohesive, with larger bubbles. When this happens, reduce the volume in your bowl to ½ cup (125g) of the starter mixture (discard the remaining mixture), and add 1 cup (250ml) water (75° to 80°F/24° to 27°C) and 1 cup (155g) flour. From now until the end of the approximately 72-hour fermenting process, you will need to repeat this feeding step whenever the starter reaches its peak. Peak activity is marked by a thicker, bubblier consistency. When this peak has passed, the bubbles will diminish in size and the consistency will thin out. For best results, repeat the feeding process as close to peak fermentation as possible.

In preparation for nighttime or other long periods when you will be unavailable to check on and feed the starter, reduce the starter to ½ cup (125g) and then add double or triple the usual amount of flour and water.

After three full 24-hour days of regular feedings or as soon as you can clearly see the mixture get very active within an hour or so after a feeding, the activation process is complete. This is the only time you'll have to wait three days to bake. Now you can do one of two things:

1. Put 1 cup (250g) or more of the starter in the refrigerator to preserve until the day before you are ready to bake your first loaf of sourdough bread.
2. Allow the starter to reach peak activity, then use it to make the dough as instructed in the following recipe. (Be sure to save at least ½ cup/125g starter in the refrigerator for your next baking.)

CARE OF REFRIGERATED STARTER

When you first put the starter in the refrigerator, leave the cover loose until the mixture is chilled throughout. After 36 to 48 hours, you can tighten down the lid.

About once every 4 to 12 weeks, take the starter out of the refrigerator and stir well. Reduce the volume if necessary, add 1 cup water (75° to 80°F/24° to 27°C) and 1 cup (155g) flour and stir well again. Allow the starter to reach room temperature and, when fermenting activity begins, place it back in the refrigerator and leave loosely covered for the first 36 to 48 hours. (Note: It is normal to see some beige or gray-colored liquid at the top of the mixture after it has been refrigerated for a few weeks. Simply stir the liquid back into the mixture the next time you take it out of the refrigerator.)

MAKING BREAD

The night before you want to bake, take about ½ cup (125g) starter out of the refrigerator and place in a bowl. Add 1 cup (250ml) water (75° to 80°F/24° to 27°C) and 1 cup (155g) flour to the remaining starter, stir and place back in the refrigerator for future use.

Add 3 cups (750ml) water (75° to 80°F/24° to 27°C) and 3 cups (470g) flour to the ½ cup (125g) starter in the bowl, cover with a kitchen towel or plastic wrap, and leave it at room temperature (between 75° and 80°F/24° to 27°C) overnight. By the next morning, your starter should be at peak activity, indicating that it is ready to use for making bread.

CLASSIC SAN FRANCISCO SOURDOUGH BREAD RECIPE

This recipe calls for using a KitchenAid stand mixer to mak e the dough, but you can also make and knead the dough in a bread machine if it will handle a fairly stiff dough, and if you can intervene during the rising cycles. Of course, you can also make the dough entirely by hand, just as the original bakers of sourdough did.

Makes one 1½-lb. (750g) loaf, two ¾-lb. (375g) loaves, or 3 or 4 mini loaves.

2 ½ cups (625g) very bubbly, active starter at peak of fermentation (referred to by bakers as "sponge")
2½ cups (390g) bread flour, unbleached wheat flour, spelt or kamut flour or other wheat flour of your choice
Salt, to taste, between 2 tsp. and 2 Tbs.
Oil or cooking spray as needed
Coarsely ground cornmeal (usually labeled stone ground)
1 egg
1 Tbs. water

Place the starter in the bowl of an electric stand mixer fitted with the flat beater. Add about 1½ cups (235g) of the flour and beat until all of the flour is absorbed by the sponge. Stop for 30 to 90 minutes before adding more flour. This resting period, called autolysis, gives the flour time to absorb the liquid.

Next add the salt, then beat and add more flour until the dough becomes too heavy for the flat beater. Switch to the dough hook and continue adding flour and beating until you have a fairly stiff dough—it should still be moist but not too sticky.

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US Version

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After the mixture has become dough and is a cohesive mass, knead with the dough hook until the dough is not sticking to the sides of the bowl, about 5 minutes (it will probably still be sticking to the bottom of the bowl).

Oil a straight-sided dough-rising bucket or a large bowl. Place the dough in the container, then oil the top of the dough. Cover with a kitchen towel or plastic wrap and let the dough rise, keeping the room temperature between 75° and 90°F (24° and 32°C). If the room temperature is cooler than 75°F (24°C), turn on the light in your oven and place dough inside. Or, turn the oven on for a minute or two and turn it off. Use an instant-read thermometer to ensure that the proper temperature of the dough is achieved. Do not expose your dough to temperatures above 90°(32°C). (Note: Expect sourdoughs to rise much more slowly than breads made with commercial yeasts. A cooler temperature range is fine—better, in fact. The dough will take longer to rise, but cooler rising temperatures also improve the flavor and texture of the bread.)

(At this point, you can cover the dough tightly and place it in the refrigerator for 1 to 14 hours. This is helpful when you run out of time or want hot bread baked at a certain time, and refrigeration will enhance the flavor of the finished bread. When you're ready to continue, bring the dough to room temperature and allow it to finish its rise. You can refrigerate the dough for the first rise or for the second one, after it has been shaped—or both if you like.)

Check on the rising dough every 30 minutes or so, until it is about 1½ to 2 times its original size. To test for readiness, push your finger ½ to ¾ inch (12mm to 2cm) into the dough. If you can see the dough spring back and fill the hole within a minute or so, it needs to continue rising. If most of the indentation remains after a couple of minutes, you're ready to proceed to the next step.

SHAPING AND BAKING

Push your closed fist gently into the middle of the dough close to the bottom of the bowl, then gently push the outside parts of the dough into the hole you've just created. This is called "punching down" the dough and serves to rearrange the gluten strands to encourage a proper second rise. Now turn the dough out of the bowl and onto the counter. If you've greased the container well, the dough should slide right out. Using a dough scraper, divide the dough into the final portions you'll use for each loaf and "round" each one (see below), then cover and let rest on the counter for about 15 minutes.

To round the dough, pick up the piece of dough that will become a loaf and gently pull the cut edges underneath, making a round ball that has a tight "skin" with no cut edges exposed. Pinch the bottom together securely, then place the round, bottom side down, on a clean, dry counter. Place your hands on the sides of the round and push from alternate sides so that it goes around in one direction on the counter. You'll see the skin tightening as you do this. Be gentle so you don't break the skin.

While the dough is resting, grease a baking sheet or loaf pan with oil or cooking spray, and sprinkle with cornmeal.

Now that the dough has rested, it's time to shape it. For a round or oval shape, pick up the dough and gently push the edges toward the underside to achieve the desired shape. Then firmly pinch the dough together on the underside. When you're satisfied with the shape of the dough, place it on the prepared baking sheet or in the loaf pan.

Cover the loaves with a kitchen towel or oiled plastic wrap and place in a warm (75° to 85°F/24° to 29°C) non-drafty spot for 1½ to 3 hours, depending on the temperature of the room and the character of the dough.

Meanwhile, if you have a baking stone, place it in the oven before preheating. Also before preheating, place a shallow, oven-safe container of water on the floor of the oven or on the lowest shelf. (If neither of these options will work in your oven, simply spritz the dough more with water while baking.) Preheat the oven to 400°F (200°C) for 45 to 60 minutes to ensure that your baking stone, water and oven are fully and evenly heated.

When the unbaked loaf has risen to 1½ to 2 times its original size and passes the finger indentation test, it's time to bake. In a small bowl, beat together the egg and the 1 Tbs. water; set aside. Just before putting the bread in the oven, take a very sharp single-edged razor blade, dip the blade into water before each cut, and slowly and gently make cuts in the top of your loaf—not straight down but at a rather sharp angle—¼ to ½ inch (6 to 12mm) deep. Be careful so the risen loaf doesn't collapse; it's better to go over a cut 2 or 3 times rather than press down too hard and risk deflating the dough. If your loaf is round, the traditional San Francisco way is to make 2 vertical slashes and 2 horizontal slashes in a tic-tac-toe pattern. If you have an oblong or oval loaf, you can still slash it that way or just make 1 long lengthwise cut.

After slashing the loaf, gently brush it with the egg wash, which adds a nice shine and helps the crust to brown. (Alternatively, you can use a cornstarch and water glaze.)

Using a spray bottle of water, lightly mist the loaves and place in the oven (place the loaves directly on the baking stone if using). As soon as you place the bread in the oven, spray the sides and floor of the oven liberally with water. (Be careful not to spray the light bulb.) Do this 3 or 4 times during the first 5 to 10 minutes of baking. Combined with the water evaporating from the pan, this spraying will help produce a thick, chewy crust on the bread. For a thinner, more delicate crust, leave out all of the water in the oven. If you like a softer crust, brush the loaf with oil or butter before and after baking.

After 10 minutes of baking, reduce the oven temperature to 375°F (190°C). The bread will take 30 to 60 minutes to bake, depending on your oven and the size of your loaves. The best way to test for doneness is to remove the bread from the oven and insert an instant-read thermometer into the center (from the side or the bottom, so the hole won't mar the bread). A reading of 200° to 210°F (95° to 99°C) means the bread is done.

Place the loaf on a wire rack and let cool for at least 30 minutes before slicing with a sharp serrated knife. If you are not serving the bread within 24 hours of the time it comes out of the oven, wait until it is completely cool, wrap in an airtight package and freeze. If desired, cut the bread into slices before freezing so you can remove as many slices as you like.

BREAD-MAKING TIPS

Sourdough is sticky, so place all of your tools in cold water to soak immediately after use. Then cleanup will be easy using just a vegetable brush.

To add more sour flavor to your bread, leave the starter in the refrigerator, unfed, for 3 to 4 weeks before using. Some breadmakers keep 2 or 3 starter containers "aging" in the refrigerator because freshly fed starter isn't as sour. Remember that longer, slower, cooler risings (even overnight in the refrigerator) will also contribute heavily to that wonderful sourdough flavor.

If you would like bigger holes in your bread, add more water or less flour to make a wetter dough, and try substituting all-purpose flour for some of the bread flour. Longer, slower proofing helps make larger holes as well.

If your free-form loaves spread out more than rise up, add more flour to the dough. If you have used all-purpose flour, substituting all or part with higher-protein bread flour will also help.

Once you've baked a few loaves, feel free to experiment by adding grated cheese, roasted garlic, nuts, grains, herbs or spices to the dough.

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