

# Baking and Eating Sourdough Bread

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*By Bob Hurt, 14 August 2011*

## **Making the Baked Bread Loaves, Start to Finish**

Friday

0600 – I take South African sourdough starter (yeast and bacteria culture from South Africa) from fridge, feed it with its own weight in flour and its own weight in unchlorinated water (I use reverse osmosis water). I call this “tripling.” Stir thoroughly, put half back into fridge to retard fermentation. I’ll have to feed it every week to keep it alive. I set aside the other half, about 25 grams, 2 tablespoons of starter, to cure. As it cures, it will create a bubbly, thickish ferment which I call “sponge.” The dough gets sour because the bacteria create acetic acid. The yeast creates alcohol (“hooch”) and carbon dioxide gas. The gas makes the dough rise. The hooch contributes to the sour taste.

1500 – triple the sponge and mix it thoroughly with a spoon. I get 75 grams and set it aside to ferment.



2300 – triple the sponge again and mix it thoroughly. I get 225 grams and set it aside to ferment.

Saturday

0815 – I have 225 grams of sponge ready for making dough. I gather together ingredients to mix in the following proportions:

1.  $X = 200$  grams sponge (about one cup not stirred down) sponge. I call  $X$  the weight of the sponge. I can use all of the sponge for this.
2.  $3X = 600$  grams unchlorinated water (about  $3 \frac{3}{4}$  cups). Water weighs 454 grams or 1 pound per pint, 227 grams per cup. I sometimes use a little extra water or an egg or two and a couple tablespoons of olive oil to make the dough sloppier so it will rise easier. I sometimes add two to four tablespoons of honey. When I want to encourage a sour or tart taste to the bread, I use ice water. This makes the bread take longer to rise and that allows the bacteria to work longer creating more acetic acid.
3.  $.1X = 20$  grams salt (4 teaspoons). I use sea salt or Kosher salt. I consider it better to put a little too much than too little.
4.  $5X = 1$  kilogram unbleached white bread flour (about 9 cups not packed down). A kilogram = 2.2 pounds. I sometimes substitute up to half the bread flour with some other flour like spelt, barley, oat, rye, or whole wheat. I have sprouted a few tablespoons of whole grains in wet newspaper, chopped them up, and added them to the flour. I have also added sunflower seeds or other seeds I have soaked in water overnight and drained thoroughly. When I use rye flour, I select the coarsely ground variety boil two cups of water per cup of rye, turn off the heat, and then stir the rye into the steaming water and let it sit over night. I have to adjust the water in the dough, but to rise properly, rye bread needs sloppiness.

0820 - I mix the sponge, water, and salt together with a spoon in a big bowl, dump in the flour, and mix it all with my bare hands to get all the ingredients wet and sticky and produce raw dough. I don't knead the dough. Alternatively, I use my electric mixer with the dough hooks. I put the sticky wet dough in an oiled bowl or plastic bag and seal out the air. I put plastic wrap on the bowl.

0830 - I set it aside in a cool place to ferment.

0915 – 1<sup>st</sup> Stretch and fold - I dust my counter top with flour, generously if the dough seems really sloppy, and dump the dough onto it, taking care not to rip or tear the dough. I gently unstick it from the bowl if it seems too sticky. I dust the top of the dough mass with flour and gently stretch the dough to make a rectangle. Then I poke my fingertips into the dough all over, pressing my fingertips straight down into the dough till I have put fingertip dimples in every available space. I then stretch the ends of the dough outward slightly and fold them inward, and dimple those smooth areas. I do the same with the sides, and then the ends, and finally fold it into a lump and stuff it back in the bag or bowl, and cover it to seal out the air.

1000 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Stretch and fold. I repeat the above process. I notice the dough has more body and cohesiveness. I handle it gently so as not to tear or rip the dough.

1045 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Stretch and fold. I repeat the above process, leaving the dough in a longish cylinder about double the length of my 9-inch bread pans. The flour dusting and gluten development have made the dough a more substantial, robustly cohesive blob.

1055 – Form into loaves. With a sharp butcher knife, I gently cut the dough across its length in the center to make a short log for each of two bread pans. Here I sometimes deviate. If the dough seems stiff enough, I might not use pans, but simply put it in a bowl to rise, or form it into smaller logs for making baguettes or shorter logs for making boules. Sometimes I lay the dough out in a one-to-two inch tall slab and use a biscuit cutter to make dinner rolls. If the dough seems sloppy, I might simply put it back in the bowl to rise, then cut them into biscuits and grill them on a dusting of corn meal, as English Muffins – I grill them two minutes per side on low heat and adjust the heat to keep them from burning in that time. The above recipe will result in two banana bread pans just over half full with dough. I suggest using the bread pans till you can bake perfect loaves in them repeatedly and reliably.



1100 - Set the loaves aside to rise. After forming them I cover them with plastic wrap to keep the air from drying them out. Rising will take anywhere from 3 to 8 hours, depending on the type of starter, ingredients starting temperature, and room temperature. The fully risen dough will protrude at least an inch above the top of the bread pan. If the dough seems sloppy, it will droop over the sides of your pans when it rises that high. You can prevent this by inserting aluminum foil into the bread pans, around all sides, and crimp the ends together to keep the dough from spreading the foil out. This will result in

nice, plump loaves. Do not allow the dough to rise too long, for if you do, it will not rise enough in the oven. Do not get impatient and bake the dough prior to completion of a proper rise, for if you do, the loaves will become too dense and less flavorful. An incomplete rise might result in too much “oven spring” when you bake, and that might crack the crust. A cracked crust can look interesting, but it allows the moisture to escape too soon after baking and dries out the loaf before you finish eating it. A perfect rise will cause oven spring during baking, and will start to crack the crust, but it will leave the crust intact.

The times shown for the following photos give you an idea how fast the dough rose for me Saturday. Remember I put the loaves of processed dough in pans at 11 AM.



1405 (give or take a few hours based on starter and temperature) – Loaves have fully risen. Set the oven to 450 to 500 degrees to preheat it. You do not need to preheat the oven, but I always do. If you want your loaves to brown nicely on the crust, you will need to have sufficient temperature over sufficient time. Since rolls bake so quickly, you would set the temperature to 500 degrees. They will brown and become done in about 15 minutes. You can bake a large loaf at 375 to 400 and produce a nicely browned result in 55 to 60 minutes. Our banana bread pan loaves will take about 40 minutes if you don't open the oven. I always lower the temperature to 375 to 400 after 15 minutes.



1440 Prepare the loaves for baking. I pour some milk in a cup, dip my kitchen scissors into it, and snip 3 inches down into the dough in the center starting at one end of the pan, then continue to dip and snip till I have put a snipped groove along the centerline at the top of the dough, end to end. This groove will allow the dough to expand without cracking the crust during baking. I then gently paint the top of each loaf with the milk. I don't worry about spilling, dripping, or getting the groove too wet. If I intend to put sesame or poppy seeds on the loaf, I do it now, as the milk helps the seeds stick. Sometimes I mix one beaten egg into the milk to make a thicker base for the seeds.

1445 Bake the loaves on the center rack of the oven. DO NOT OPEN THE OVEN until the loaves have nearly finished baking.





1500 Turn the oven temperature down to 400 after 15 minutes of baking.

1500 Insert an oven thermometer probe into the center of the end of the loaf. Push it all the way in. Do this quickly and shut the oven door immediately to retain the heat.

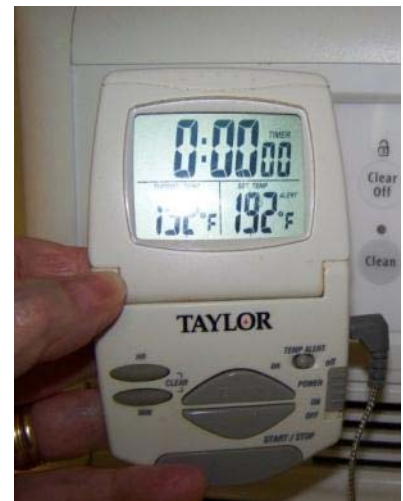


The Author with a Sourdough Loaf in 2010



1502 to 1515 Turn off the oven and remove the loaves when their internal temperature reaches 192 degrees. If you leave them in much longer than this, the internal heat will dissipate all the water vapor and dry out the loaves prematurely.

1515 Turn the loaves out onto a rack to cool. I always set the rack on top of the loaf pans. If I set the rack on the counter top, the heat at the bottom of the loaves creates dew during cooling and makes the loaves wet on the bottom. Do not cut the loaves till they have cooled.





1545 You may cut into the loaves now. My wife always wants me to cut off the end and butter the soft part of the bread for her. She loves the crunch of the crust when she bites into the end slice.

1800 seal the uncut loaves tightly in plastic (heavy bag or sealing machine) and freeze them after they have completely cooled. If you want to leave a loaf out for eating, put it in a plastic bag and tie the end shut to keep it from drying out. This will make the crust softer instead of crunchier. I say "So what?" The crust will crunch nicely right after baking. But I'd rather have my bread fresh rather than crunchy.

### **As for Eating the Bread**

I rather enjoy a breakfast of bacon, eggs, and toast. I call this recipe "Gas House Eggs" for reasons you will have to guess. I'll let the photos show you what happens after I fry the bacon on low heat, pour out the fat, and lightly butter some sourdough slices...





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