

Brockwell Bake sourdough with our “Light Weald Flour”



Looking after your starter

The yeasts and lacto bacilli in your starter are some of the most hardy beasts on the planet however in order to be used for baking they need to be basically in comfortable circumstances, with nice temperature and plenty to eat^[1].

When you are not using your starter for baking you can step down their food and warmth just a little and they will be OK for quite a while. Generally a starter which has been brought up to the right level of activity for baking can then be kept for up to a week in your fridge and when needed again can be brought back up to full activity with a couple of feeds, maybe within half

[1] You can get some more scientific explanation of things at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sourdough#Biology_and_chemistry_of_sourdough

a day (depending on the ambient temperature). Any longer in the fridge without a feed it will certainly not be impossible to revive your starter but it may take a day or two of feeding once out of the fridge.^[2]

The easiest way to monitor the activity in your starter is to keep it in a container such as a tall Kilner jar on which you can mark on the side the level of your starter.

In general always feed your starter by doubling its quantity.

Different styles of sourdough baking in different countries keep and use a starter at different consistencies, German as a stiff dough built up from a little ball in several stages before final dough, French “levian” is often a slurry with about 100% hydration (equal quantities of flour and water), Italian “biga” typically slightly stiffer, maybe 80% hydration. The more liquid you keep your starter the easier it will be for the yeasts and lacto bacilli to move around, find food, form colonies and so on, in other words things will go faster and you can use this to adjust things to fit your schedule. Some people will say slower (denser mix) will give more subtle complex flavours.

In these baking notes we are going to use the starter at 100% hydration.

Feeding your starter

So to get started for a bake take your starter out of the fridge, maybe sniff it to see how acidic it has got, make some calculation how much starter you will need for your recipe and maybe as a result of this throw away some of the existing. Now calculate how much flour and water you



will need to add to double the volume, for instance 100g. flour and 100g. water. Some people only feed with wheat, some with rye or a mixture of these. Any rye will give much quicker results as it has higher levels of both enzymes and naturally present yeasts than wheat. Some people also like to use apple juice or other liquids that provide extra sugars and ascorbic acid (Vitamin C) instead of water. Use water (or other liquid) at blood temperature which is the ideal for the micro flora of your starter to get into the right state for baking. Mix your starter thoroughly (use a wooden spoon because of acidity), mark the level in your container and put in a warm place.

When fully fit and at 100% hydration your starter will go through a cycle of around 3 to 4 hours (faster if rye is used) where it peaks with volume in your container increased (because of bubbles in the starter) by around 65%. After this peak, acidity will start to build up and the structure around the bubbles in the solution break down so that the level of your starter will then begin to slowly fall.

[2] The acidity of your starter will increase the longer you leave it in your fridge though it is also dependant on how long you gave your starter from its last feed before putting it into the fridge, the less time before refrigerating the better unless you deliberately want to create a highly acidic starter. Normally a liquid starter left for a long time in or out of a fridge will develop a layer of grey looking clear liquid on its top, called by some “hooch”, you can pour this away when you get around to reviving your starter. If you want to store your starter for a relatively long period you may want to add less water on its last feed before going into the fridge than normal, you may even want to store it at a dough type consistency. If actually want to store your starter for more than a month or for instance send some to a friend you can actually dry your starter. For this get a totally clean cloth, dip it in the starter and hang somewhere to dry. When dry crumple the cloth and collect what falls off, store in a dry airtight container.

Depending on when you last used your starter the first reviving feed may take quite a bit longer than this. For a second feed, which will normally be needed unless you have used your starter very recently, plus any subsequent feeds, when you choose to make the feed depends a bit on how sour you want your sourdough to be. If you re-feed when the volume of your starter has reached 30% extra than the previously existing mix's acidity will be reduced, if you leave till after the previous feed cycle has peaked, acidity (sourness) will tend to build up (and activity in the new feed will be slowed a bit).