

GUIDE TO STARTING A SOUR CULTURE

Sourdough cultures have been used to make breads for thousands of years. It is a lengthy process, but the resultant sourdough breads are more flavoursome and digestible, have lower GI and require no preservatives. Thus, sourdough breads are also far more nutritious.

The process of making sourdough breads can often be over-complicated which may seem daunting to novice bakers! This guide is intended to simplify the process for you. Once you have your culture established, making sourdough loaves is not difficult, it just requires time. Keeping the sour culture alive takes only two minutes of your time each day!

Sourdough breads are made from flour, salt and water only. Compare this to the ingredients list on mass produced bread on which you may find up to 13 ingredients! Rather than using yeast to rise the bread, sourdough loaves use a *sour culture* made from just flour and water.

At Cinnamon Square, we have made sourdough bread since we first opened in 2005. Our philosophy has always been to offer our customers wholesome, nutritious real bread. We continue to use the same sour cultures started in 2005 to make all of our sourdough loaves to date. In 2010, we won a Gold Great Taste Award for our Wheat and Rye Sourdough.

STARTING YOUR SOUR CULTURE

A Sour Culture is made from just flour and water, and is used to leaven bread instead of fresh or dried yeast. It will take around two weeks for your Sour Culture to achieve the stability to survive indefinitely, and be active enough to rise bread. You will only need to make a Sour Culture from scratch once, after which it will be kept alive by feeding it daily with flour and water.

A Sour Culture will remain fresh as it is naturally very acidic, preventing any mould or bad bacteria from growing in it, yet allowing certain strains of wild yeast in the air and flour to enter and flourish in the culture. These wild yeasts will leaven the bread by producing carbon dioxide, just like commercial yeast. However, wild yeasts produce carbon dioxide at a much slower rate, and so far more sour culture must be used in a loaf to give it rise, and the loaf must prove for much longer.

To start a Sour Culture, combine equal quantities of organic flour and water, and then feed it daily with half its weight of flour and half its weight of water. See the table below for a day-to-day feeding regime.

You will see I have used wholemeal flour on day 1 only. This is optional, but I find it introduces more yeast to the Sour Culture, which is useful to make it active.

Your Sour Culture will be ready for use when it smells acidic, looks really bubbly 4-6 hours after feeding, and has a steady consistency. Continue daily feeding and discarding when necessary to keep the total weight to a usable amount.

DAY-BY-DAY FEEDING SCHEDULE

DAY	ORGANIC FLOUR	WATER (TEPID)	TOTAL WEIGHT
1	50g Wholemeal	50g	100g
2	50g White	50g	200g
3	100g White	100g	400g
4	Culture should now smell acidic and look bubbly		
	200g White	200g	800g
5	Stir, then discard 700g into compost and feed the remaining 100g		
	50g White	50g	200g
6	100g White	100g	400g
7	200g White	200g	800g
8	Stir, then discard 700g into compost and feed the remaining 100g		
	50g White	50g	200g
9	100g White	100g	400g
10	200g White	200g	800g
11	Stir, then discard 700g into compost and feed the remaining 100g		
	50g White	50g	200g
12	100g White	100g	400g
13	200g White	200g	800g
14	Stir, then discard 700g into compost and feed the remaining 100g		
	50g White	50g	200g
15	100g White	100g	400g
16	200g White	200g	800g

A FEW NOTES ON SOUR CULTURES

- Don't be surprised if your Sour Culture attracts fruit flies, they seem to love it!
- If a clear liquid is present on top of your culture it probably needs feeding, and may indicate that you have missed a feed or two. It should come back to life after a few days of regular feeding. If the liquid is grey in colour your Sour Culture will probably be starving and may not come back to life, especially if it smells bad.
- You can refrigerate and even freeze your Sour Culture. When you wish to use it again it may take a few days or more to get fully active.

PREPARING YOUR STARTER FOR BAKING

Before using your Sour Culture to make bread, it will require feeding twice a day for the three days prior to use. This allows the culture to become extremely active with wild yeasts. Try to feed the Sour Culture at 12 hour intervals, and time the final feed 12 hours prior to when you start to make your sourdough loaf.

TOP TIP - I would suggest that when you start the daily twice-feeding process, you take a fresh container and place only a small portion of your sour culture (ie 50g) in it. Keep the rest of your Sour Culture in it's original container and feed twice a day as normal.

DON'T continue to twice-feed the Sour Culture for more than a few day as it will start to become less acidic.

PLANNING THE TIMINGS

You will need to plan when you want to bake your bread, and from which work backwards to establish when you need to start twice-feeding your Sour Culture.

The following table outlines the timings for baking a loaf of bread on Saturday afternoon. The entire process below takes 78.5 hours in total, but is well worth the wait.

TASK	DURATION	EXAMPLE TIME PLAN
Bake	0.5 hour	Saturday 2:30pm
Final Proof	4 +/- hours	Saturday 10:30am
Bulk Fermentation of Dough	2 hours	Saturday 8:30am
Dough Preparation & Mixing	0.5 hour	Saturday 8am
Day 3 Twice Feeding	24 hours	Friday 8am and 8pm
Day 2 Twice Feeding	24 hours	Thursday 8am and 8pm
Day 1 Twice Feeding	24 hours	Wednesday 8am and 8pm

NOTE: the dough can be made at night and then refrigerated until the morning, when it can be removed and allowed to warm up and gently prove. This offers some flexibility on timings. The crust of the resulting bread will be richer in colour and have an abundance on tiny bubbles in called 'fisheyes'.