

IT IS SURELY A WONDER OF NATURE THAT SOMETHING SOUR or *spoiled* can make bread rise and delicious besides. Sourdough is probably the easiest bread to make (once you have a good starter), and its flavor is exquisitely distinctive and exciting. I have included in this section Sourdough French, Sourdough Rye, and Sourdough Pancakes.

Making and Using a Sourdough Starter

A *starter* is required in the making of sourdough bread. Growing in the starter are microorganisms that cause the bread to rise and give it its characteristic sour taste. The starter is mixed with flour and water to form a *sponge* (similar to the *sponge* for yeasted bread), which then sits overnight. By morning the entire mixture is sour. Some of the sponge is removed to replenish the starter before other ingredients are added. To replenish the starter, fill a jar or crock (not metal) only half full, as the starter will rise some as it sits. Cover and keep refrigerated.

A sourdough starter can be made by combining 1 tablespoon of dry yeast, 2½ cups warm water, 2 teaspoons sugar or honey, and 2½ cups flour. Cover and let it ferment for five days, stirring daily. The starter may be kept indefinitely in the refrigerator, although it is probably best to use it once a week or so. If liquid rises to the top during storage, stir it in again. The starter and the sponge are both the consistency of thick mud.

Another way to make a sourdough starter is to take any sour food, such as two-day-old or older rice, cereal, coconut, fruit, vegetables, or milk, and mix it with 2½ cups whole wheat flour and enough water to make the dough spongy. Cover and let it sit for 3 to 4 days, stirring daily, until a distinctly sour smell arises. Each starter will be somewhat different in its flavor and efficacy at making the dough rise.

Sourdough Bread

[MAKES 2
LOAVES]

Here is a basic recipe for sourdough bread. The dough can also be made into English Muffins (page 58).

AT NIGHT:

5 cups whole wheat flour
1 to 1½ cups starter (see page 77)
4 cups lukewarm water

IN THE MORNING:

Replenish the starter.
½ cup oil
1 tablespoon salt
5 to 6 cups or more whole wheat flour

At night, add the starter to 5 cups of flour without mixing. Then mix together while adding water gradually, until a thick, pasty batter is formed. Beat well. Cover and set aside overnight.

In the morning, remove 1 to 1½ cups from the sponge to replenish the starter, and refrigerate it for the next batch. Now fold into the sponge the oil, salt, and remaining flour gradually with a spoon. When the dough comes away from the sides of the bowl, remove to a floured bread board. Knead for 5 minutes, adding more flour as necessary. The dough will be a little softer and stickier than normal yeasted bread.

Cut into two pieces and form into loaves. To make French Loaves, see page 79. The loaves can also be shaped into balls (and baked on a sheet) or standard loaves (and baked in oiled bread pans). Slit the tops with lengthwise gashes. Allow 2 hours for rising.

Brush or spritz the tops with water and place in a preheated 425° oven for 20 minutes. Brush or spritz the tops with water again, turn the oven down to 375°, and continue baking for an hour or so until the loaves are nicely browned.

A simple variation on the basic sourdough bread provides the hearty, earthy flavor of rye.

Sourdough Rye Bread

Substitute 3 to 4 cups of rye flour for the whole wheat flour in the morning addition. Shape into round loaves and bake on a greased sheet or on a baking sheet sprinkled with cornmeal. Bake as in the basic recipe (page 78).

Here is one procedure for shaping French Loaves. Using unbleached white flour in place of some or all of the whole wheat in the Sourdough Bread recipe will produce a more traditional loaf.

Sourdough French Loaves

To shape the French Loaves, roll the dough out in a rectangle about 1/4 inch thick on a floured board. Then roll up the dough tightly, as you would roll up a carpet.

Pinch the seam together and roll the loaf about to shape it evenly. Place the finished loaf, seam down, on a baking sheet that has been sprinkled with cornmeal. Brush the loaves with water. Make a 1/2-inch-deep lengthwise slit in the top.

Let rise and bake as for the regular Sourdough Bread loaves (page 78).

