

Conquering the Heart of Borodinsky Bread

Finding life lessons and deep flavor in a sourdough starter.

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The key to a great Borodinsky bread is the sourdough starter. **Jennifer Eremeeva / MT**

Yeast has always eluded me.

Not in the current sense of “I can’t find any yeast,” a cry heard these days from Montana to Myanmar. My problem is that I have never been able to master yeast. Recipes that begin, “proof the yeast” in my hands end up sagging like a three-day-old birthday balloon. I have always just assumed that this was part of my own innate inadequateness, like my inability to drive a stick shift or nurture a house plant.

In the spirit of our current political climate, I am content to blame this on Russian yeast, which has a different texture to the kind you get in the rest of the world. Russian yeast looks like rock salt — the kind trucks scatter over icy roads, whereas a mere teaspoon of rest-of-

the-world yeast contains hundreds — even thousands, of teeny, symmetrical particles, visible to the naked eye, yes, but only barely.

Alas, neither of these yeasts works for me. Being yeast-challenged is permanently baked into my DNA, it seems.

Though I make my living writing about food, I have spent my professional life swerving away from the entire canon of yeast-based recipes. No cinnamon or sticky buns, no dinner rolls, no challah or brioche for me. The only exception is the annual *kulich* for Russian Orthodox Easter, which somehow always rises — presumably in keeping with the season.

When, during Week 1 of imposed COVID-19 self-isolation, my various feeds became clogged with sticky beige sourdough starter porn, I resolutely kept scrolling. I'd been down the sourdough starter road before, I knew every pothole along its length, and I wasn't venturing down it again. Sourdough starters are just pre-industrial era yeast, and I was sure that trying to get one going would only end in tears: it would not become "viable," and I knew that sometime around Day 5, I would remove the lid and be asphyxiated by a stench akin to paint thinner, and have to scrap the entire thing and return to Day 1. If past was prologue, I knew that the 7-9-day experiment would use up a ton of flour, which is not a commodity to squander in these apocalyptic times on doomed-to-fail cooking experiments. No, I said to those sexy starters on Instagram, the rest of the world can go crazy over natural yeast in a glass jar, I have better things to do.

I was, of course, sucked back in almost immediately.

A surge of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) soon overcame my chronic Imposter Syndrome. The whole world was out there blithely making beautiful, crusty boules, baguettes, and batards out of their starters — many of them far less experienced in the kitchen than I. If they could do it, I reasoned, why shouldn't I try once more? Then there was the practical impetus: getting suited up with mask and gloves for hit-or-miss forays to the bakery which might — but just as easily might not — have a fresh, aromatic loaf just out of the oven were eating up a lot of my day.

So I rolled up my sleeves, took several deep breaths, and got started.

A sourdough starter is a weeklong endeavor which involves mixing flour and water and letting it sit in a glass jar in a warm place.* Natural yeast forms, encouraged by regular "feedings." This is often the weirdest part for the uninitiated or the parsimonious. On successive days, a small amount of the starter is decanted into a clean jar — "the discard" is removed — while fresh flour and water feed the remaining starter. After about 4-5 days of lather, rinse, repeat, the starter forms air bubbles and expands several hours after feeding. Once the starter doubles in size after feeding (around Day 7-9), it is viable and ready to bake with. Once viable, a starter is very hard to kill and can languish in the fridge for a bit of a rest, brought back to life 24-48 hours prior to baking by bringing it to room temperature again and feeding it.

Sourdough starter is as old as bread itself and provides the tangy taste of a great sourdough boule. But starters can also be used in pancakes, waffles, or any recipe that includes flour and water, where it adds additional buoyancy and layers of flavor to favorite recipes. [The Boy who](#)

[Bakes](#) has mind-bendingly great recipe for Chocolate Chip Cookies using the “discard” sourdough starter.

These days, I mark time (and, if I’m honest, the state of my self-confidence) by the sticky beige contents of the glass jars nestled in the warmest corners of my kitchen. When morning finds my starter doubled in size and studded with huge air holes, my day will bubble forth in a yeasty haze of productivity. But if my starter is flat and unresponsive — “lazy” in the parlance of my new YouTube mentors — I, too, will be sluggish and dopy, irritable, and unable to rise to the occasion.

I lavish my starter with attention. I’ve named it, which is no crazier than naming house plants: I call mine “Misha” after my friend Mike, who is effervescent, optimistic, and always buoys me up when I am down. When I think no one is listening, I talk to Misha about all kinds of topics, and he’s a wonderful listener. After doing a ton — and I am talking tens of hours — of research and finding a posse of internet gurus to mentor me, as well as several different versions of the starter, Misha is not only viable, he’s robust, airy, and champing at the bit. He needs regular feeding if he’s working every day, but he’s survived a 5-day hiatus in the fridge (a nail-biting interlude), after which it took only one feeding to make him fighting fit again and ready for the next batch of baking.

Reader, I have conquered yeast. And here’s what I’ve learned.

“Trust the Process”

This is what my new internet mentors, [Baker Bettie](#), [The Rye Baker](#), and [Foodgeek](#) kept reminding me, and for once, I listened. I kept feeding Misha, even beyond the 7 days the complicated baking cookbooks advocated. I didn’t throw away Misha after he failed to pass an initial “float test.” This is a popular check of a starter’s viability: spoon a slight amount of starter into a bowl of water. If it floats, it’s viable, if it doesn’t, it isn’t ready (“inconclusive,” Baker Bettie assured me, though Claire Saffitz refuses to create a levian without a positive float test.) On Day 10, there Misha was, bubbling away and nothing since this pandemic set in has felt so satisfying. “Trust the process” has become my new mantra — even outside the kitchen. I’m planting herbs in my neglected garden today, so we’ll see.

“Maybe You’re Not the Problem”

All these years, I just assumed I was yeast-challenged and that this would never change. It wasn’t the yeast; it was me. But when Misha failed to thrive, the gurus gave me some other culprits to investigate, and it turns out that the tap water I was using was the problem. The solution was simple: I set a pitcher of water out on the counter 12 hours before feeding Misha and the chlorine in the water evaporates. This made an immense difference almost immediately, and Misha rose like a phoenix. And I remind myself of this when something goes wrong in other aspects of my life. “You aren’t the problem,” I whisper to myself, as I tip-toe away from my daughter’s latest meltdown about how the pandemic is ruining her life.

“Learn a New Language”

This should be a no-brainer for someone who has lived abroad for so long, but I needed the

stillness of self-isolation to sit down and learn scary new words like “autolyze” and “levian.” The science of baking isn’t complicated, but it is a science, and ignoring concepts such as “percentage of hydration” and “developing the gluten” is foolhardy. (“Autolyze,” by the way, is simply a French term for mixing flour and water and letting it sit a while.)

I’m not a natural mathematician so weighing the ingredients and calculating percentages doesn’t come naturally, but slowing down and learning how to do all of this made an enormous difference. “Learn a New Language” also has wide-ranging applications outside of the kitchen, but at the moment it is helping me understand my new 9-week-old puppy, Tyrion, who communicates very clearly to anyone willing to listen to his particular language.

Once Misha was truly alive and kicking, I created Ducky, his more exotic rye cousin (because a starter shouldn’t ever be lonely!) The three of us have made Borodinsky Bread, Russia’s beloved coriander-spiked black bread, from Stanley Ginsberg’s authoritative cookbook, “The Rye Baker.”

We’ve also made savory waffles, pancakes, and a chewy Deli Rye Bread with caraway seeds. I now feel ready to tackle a real sourdough bread, and if I can do it, so can you!

Resources

*Sourdough starters are created over a 5-10-day period using different ratios of water, flour, and part of the starter itself, once it gets doing. For a step-by-step recipe, choose a resource below, based on your learning style. I’ve tried each one and they all work, though ratios and percentages vary. Just trust the process.

YouTube

If you are looking for video tutorials, and a soothing handholding, troubleshooting mentor, choose one of these:

- [Baker Bettie](#) (she’s your reassuring and dependable BFF from high school who bakes like a dream).
- [Food Geek](#) (he’s a cool, no drama Dane who loves the science of baking and makes things very clear and manageable).
- [Joshua Weissman](#) (a kinetic Brooklyn hipster with an infectious can-do attitude).
- [The Prairie Homesteader](#) (nothing phases the Prairie Homesteader. Nothing).

How-to and Why Articles

If you are looking for an authoritative long form article that explains the science and gives a credible “why” for every “how,” look no further than the *New York Times*’s multi-media presentation by Claire Saffitz on [How to Make Sourdough Bread](#).

Books

Books about making bread are legion, but let the buyer beware: you may prefer beginning with the resources above and then move on to a book. I’ve found “Flour, Water, Salt, Yeast: The Fundamentals of Artisan Bread and Pizza” by Ken Forkish (surely a *nom de guerre*?) is authoritative and informative but not for the faint of heart by any means. He also bakes as if

he's doing it for the Russian Army and not a carb-watching household of three. "Tartine Bread," by Chad Robertson is equally thorough, but you may not wish to dedicate all your time to the sacred mission of baking a perfect sourdough loaf. A good compromise for technique and easy-to-make rye bread recipes is the clear, concise, and dependable [The Rye Baker](#) by the wonderful Stanley Ginsberg, who runs the authoritative [Rye Baker Blog](#) and lifesaving [The New York Bakers](#) online shop, where North Americans can source flour, and hard-to-find ingredients such as red rye malt.

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