

**YOUR FIRST
SOURDOUGH: A
Fermentation
Manifesto
Or: How I Learned
to Stop Worrying
and Love the Blob**

Part One: The Starter

Productive Decay

Welcome to you, and to the billions of microscopic beings that form you. To cultivate a sourdough starter is to develop an intentional community with those beings, to assert agency in the ecosystem that you *are*.

Sourdough is the taming of wild yeast, the husbandry of lactobacillus bacteria to use as leaven within a loaf of bread. Like any cross-species collaboration, the taming is a two-way street of behavior modification, a dance of mutual nourishment and necessity. Are you using the starter, or are humans the hosts and patrons for the globe-spanning lactobacillus empire?

A starter is a swamp of flour and water that provides a fertile medium for wild yeast to settle, propagate, and die. In dying, the denizens of your starter swamp release the gas of decay. It is the cycle of life that creates the sought-after levity within the bread.

The starter tempts our desire for the continuity of the individual, but its reality rejects human notions of being, instead existing as a vast system in a constant process of becoming and un-becoming. Though we may name our starters, it begs the question of the Ship of Theseus: if all the constituent bacteria are constantly evolving, dying, and changing, can we ever bake with the same starter twice?

Begin your contract with lactobacillus by creating the starter to tempt their collaboration.

- Day one: Mix 100 grams of flour and 100 grams of water in a tall glass jar, preferably with a wide mouth.
- Day two: Discard all but 50 grams of the mixture. Add in 75 grams of flour and 75 grams of water.
- Repeat until it bubbles hungrily and doubles in volume in about six hours.

Discarding in this stage removes any harmful bacteria as you wait for the wild yeast to culture and outcompete the other microorganisms.



Part Two: The Leaven

A Ritual Begins

Sometime before you plan on mixing the ingredients for your loaf—six to 24 hours before—you commence the process of awakening your starter, creating the yeasty leaven that will be the engine for your bread.

The leavening is a chance to reflect upon the terroir of your starter: the place, space, and land from which it imbibes an ineffable essence. Consider also the aspect of time. Has your starter changed over time? Perhaps it has accompanied you on a move or a journey. The starter, like ourselves, embodies the tension between continuity and difference, constantly changing, yet possessing a kind of memory, if only through the genetic record of the lactobacillus.

The leavening is a raising of energy, a commencement of a ritual rhythm with deep human resonances. As much as you are acting on the starter, the starter is inviting you to fold into the rhythm of fermentation. Do not be surprised if accepting this invitation changes you as much as it does your starter.

The leaven is created in the same manner as feeding your starter: by adding 100 grams of water and 100 grams of flour to about 25 grams of starter (which you can get to after discarding down to it). Let it ferment for 6 to 24 hours. This depends on temperature and the activity of your starter.



Part Three: Dough

Theologically, each loaf is, in part, an individual emanation from the bubbling collectivity of the starter. The loaf is an individual's life; the starter, the transcendent spirit, an ideal form from which the loaves come forth. Or, the starter is a genetic lineage, each loaf a leaf on a family tree.

The loaf is born, grows, is shaped, hardened into a final form—assuming an identity that is fixed: crusty, soft, gummy, etc.—before being consumed piece by piece at various speeds, rejoining the world of bacteria from which it came.

The birth of your loaf is elemental alchemy, combining the four primary elements of earth, air, fire, water, as well as a fifth element: spirit.

- Earth): The salt is your representative from the mineral kingdom. Salt preserves, grounds, and balances, aiding our cells in achieving osmotic equilibrium. Without it, we die, and worse still, the bread will taste bad. **12 Grams Salt**
- Air: Leavening dough is essentially the process of harnessing the air for the sake of texture, flavor, and health. The intentional interaction with your microbial community, expressed through a sourdough practice, allows you to harness that which is floating in the air. **200 Grams Starter**
- Fire: Agriculture is the original solar power, transforming the sun's energy into life-sustaining calories. Wheat is an ancient human intervention on nature. The sun's fire lives in the pillowy white and husky brown of modern flours, its calories providing the fuel we need to burn. **450 Grams Salt**
- Water: Water is life. Water is us. Water is just water. There is no alchemy to this ingredient. It assumes the quality of a canvas or medium upon which the rest of the ingredients dance. Consider the ceaseless journey the water you're using has taken to get to your bowl—a cycle that unites all life on this planet. **300 Grams Water**
- Spirit: For the sake of our recipe, you are bringing the spirit into the mix, literally through mixing. Your muscle imbues the previous elements with kinetic energy, your will initiating the entire process. Not to be discounted, there's a spirit of the starter in the dough itself, which you will find contains its own *dough*. **??**

Mix the elements until combined into a shaggy mess. Use a good sturdy spoon and a bowl that you can cover, and let your dough sit for 30 minutes to an hour.



Part Four: Shaping

The intentional structure of your loaf consists of lateral folds of dough, allowing delicious networks of glutenous proteins to form. This structure is attained through a simple gesture of stretching and folding the dough back in on itself.

Pull a corner of your messy dough ball, stretching it up to just before breaking, and fold it to the opposite side. Do this three or four times to different parts of the dough.

These instructions are intentionally ambiguous because the gesture of shaping is born of practice and becomes a dance between hands and dough. Feel it out. The result you're aiming for is a smooth, self-cohering ball. Let it rest again for around 30 minutes to an hour. Wait times depend on the ambient temperature, again connecting the process beyond the bowl. Warmer temps require shorter times as the fermentation acts quicker, and vice versa for colder temperatures.

Repeat this fold-and-wait process one or two times. Or don't. Again, you can feel it out. It is not so much about the individual loaves but the practice, which permits and rewards experimentation—the essence of baking.



Part Five: Baking

Now the elements are choreographed again for the main event. Begin heating your oven. Put the vessel you will use for baking in there. A cast iron Dutch oven with a cover is the best candidate for this job, but a cast iron pan, pizza stone, or regular baking pan will work. Set your oven's temperature to 485 degrees Fahrenheit.

While it is preheating, we're going to give the dough its final form. Dump it onto a well-floured surface and repeat a similar gesture used previously. Fold each corner of the dough to the opposite corner, creating tension and a smooth, unified surface. The folded corners will be the bottom of the loaf, and when the opposite side is smooth and taut, flip it so the folds face down. Perform any final shaping by tucking and rotating your dough ball as spherical as possible.

Place the dough into a bowl, the smooth top facing down. Conventionally, this is done in bamboo baskets called bannetons, but they can be substituted for any bowl with a floured piece of fabric inside. Linen works well. Let the dough sit in the bowl while your oven heats up. You have an alternative option here of putting the dough in the refrigerator overnight, taking it out in the morning while your oven heats up.

When you're at heat, remove the hot vessel from the oven. You'll need to add something that will stop the loaf from sticking. I usually use parchment paper, but you can also use an edible material like cornmeal or oats—another chance to experiment.

If you're using a Dutch oven or other covered baking vessel, put the loaf in the oven with the cover on. Let it cook at 485 degrees for about 18 minutes. When the time is up, remove the cover and let it bake for another 20 minutes. The cover provides steam, aiding in the rising of the loaf. Removing the cover allows the crust to form.

To achieve this without a cover, place a separate pan or pot in the oven while it is preheating. When first adding your loaf, carefully pour water into the second vessel, taking care not to burn yourself nor break your oven's glass with the splash-back. Remove this water after 18 minutes.

The process of baking sees the lactobacillus perform its final, airy expansion in death. Their multitudinous life force is transcended into the unity of the loaf, only to be divided into slices in its final consumption. When you remove your loaf from the oven, listen closely as the dough creaks, cracks, hisses, and sings for the glory of the process.



Part Six: Epilogue

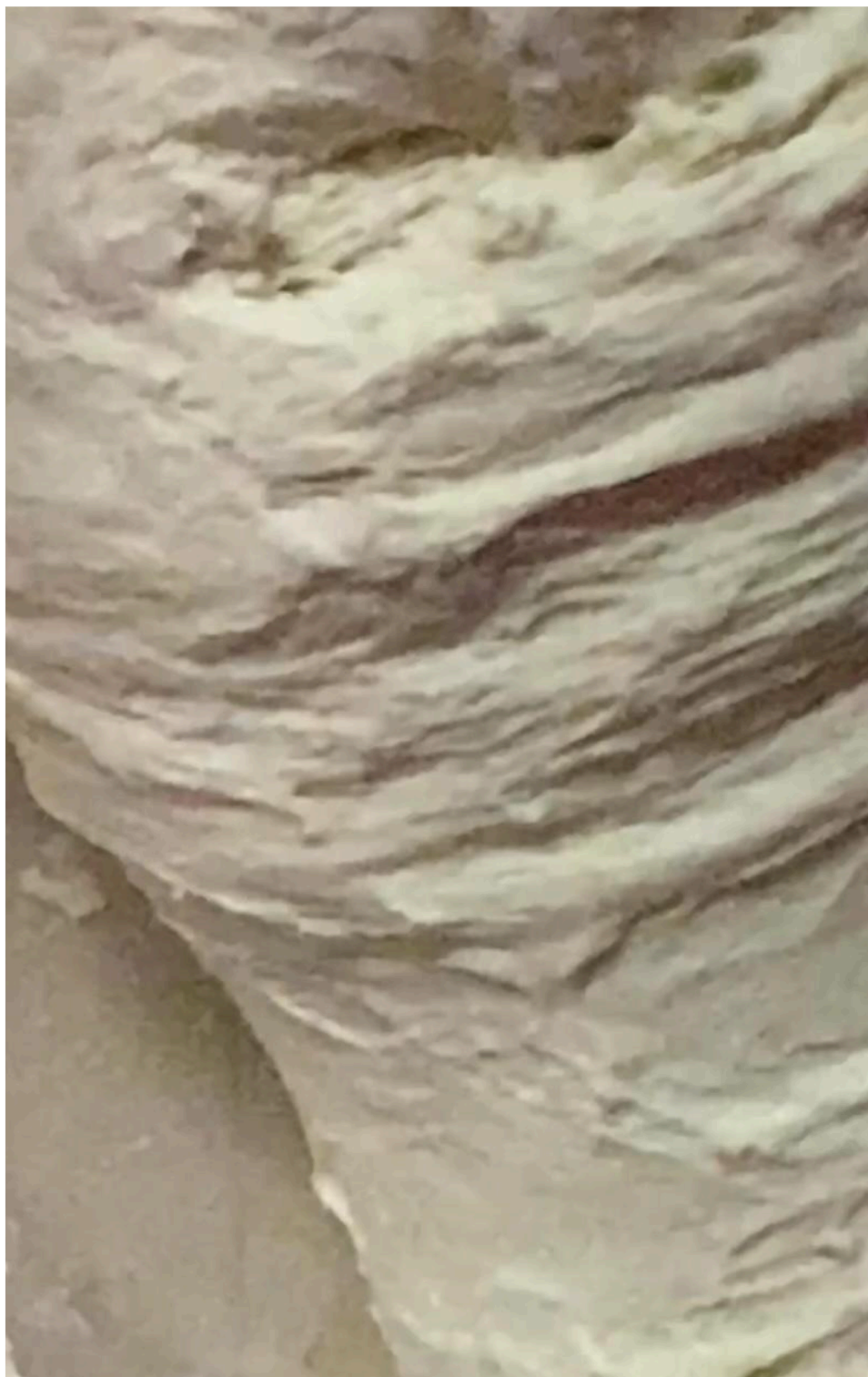
When I described this process to my grandmother, she balked at the time and labor required to make a simple loaf of bread, when a similar commodity can be purchased relatively cheaply. Indeed, the entire process sits in tension with the ethos of Western society in the 20th century and the values of convenience and industrial production. From the perspective of exchange value, you just can't square this circle.

But the practice of bread making and the rituals of sourdough contain transcendent values for your life. Entering into a contract with *Lactobacillus* will change you, if only by implicating you into its rhythms—rhythms contrary to the many others we are implicated in day to day, be it wage labor or algorithmic feeds. Sourdough cannot be rushed or faked, but it also contains no inherent laws or rules. It is a cultural-historical document of cross-species collaboration, experimentation, and risk-taking.

Welcome to the fold, and let me know how it goes.

—Jon Dough

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A Baker's Prayer

*Oh Lactic Acid Bacteria,
Who art in my jar,
Hallowed be thy tang.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
In dough as it is in starter.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our impatience,
As we forgive ourselves for forgetting and
over-proofing.
Lead us not into store-bought yeast,
And deliver us from Wonder Bread.
For thine is the crust,
The crumb, and the glory,
Forever and ever,
Amen.*