

Sourdough Starter

Day 1: Growing the Culture (Fermentation Begins)

- 1 pound red or black grapes
- 4 cups water
- 3 3/4 cups flour

Lay the grapes on a double layer of cheesecloth. Tie together the opposite corners of the cheesecloth to form a bag around them and set aside.

Mix the water and flour in a one gallon container (ceramic, glass, or plastic). Hold the grapes over the container and lightly mash them with your hands, squeezing the juice into the flour mixture. Swish the grapes through the mixture a few times, then push them to the bottom. Cover the container tightly with its lid or a piece of plastic wrap. Leave the culture at room temperature, ideally 70 to 75 degrees F.

Days 2 and 3: Fermentation Continues

On the second day, you will notice a few tiny bubbles in the mixture. On the third day, depending on how active the culture is, it may be full of frothing bubbles, or have only a few more than the day before.

Day 4: Refreshing the Culture

- 1 cup water
- 1 cup flour

By the fourth day the mixture may begin to turn a brownish purple, and it may seethe with large bubbles. If the culture was especially active on its third day, the activity may subside on the fourth. A distinct, unpleasant alcohol-like smell should be present.

Uncover the culture, add water and flour, and mix everything.

Days 5 through 9: Fermentation Continues

There's not much you have to do to the culture at this point, though you should check on it once a day to see how it's changing. The mixture normally separates, forming a yellowish liquid top layer. Mold may appear. If it does, remove it and add a cup of flour and a cup of water. If it's removed fairly promptly, mold won't hurt the culture.

Days 10 through 14: Building the Starter

Uncover the culture and remove the bag of grapes, squeezing any remaining liquid into the

culture. Discard the grapes. Stir the contents of the container well. Pour off and discard all but about 1 cup of the culture. Transfer the working culture to a clean, sealable but not airtight, container.

What you'll be doing for the next five days is feeding the starter three times a day to get it into shape for baking. It's critical that you watch over your starter and not miss a feeding.

First Feeding

1/2 cup water

1/2 cup flour

Second Feeding: 4 to 6 hours later

1 cup water

1 cup flour

Third Feeding: 4 to 6 hours later

2 cups water

2 cups flour

Let it ferment 8 to 12 hours, not more than 15 hours. The starter reaches its optimum strength 8 to 12 hours after it's been fed.

The next day, no more than 15 hours after the third feeding, repeat the feedings (starting with the 1 cup of the culture reserved from the previous day).

Maintaining the Starter

The starter reaches its optimum strength 8 to 12 hours after it's been fed. This is when it will be ready for use in making bread. Do not use it more than 15 hours after its last feeding. When using the starter in recipes, remember that the well mixed starter will have equal parts water and flour (1 cup starter equals 1/2 cup water and 1/2 cup flour).

If you don't want to feed (and make bread) everyday, refrigerate the starter after the first feeding, but don't leave it more than a few days. Take it out for a day and go through all feedings to keep it healthy and active.

Cooler weather will slow down the starter and make it more acidic; it might not be as bubbly as on warmer days. Warmer weather will make it more active. The above feeding schedule are for optimum conditions and may not be what you experience with your starter. The best thing to do is watch what it is doing, feed it often enough to maintain an active, frothy and having a proper "yeasty" aroma.

This method is an excerpt (with minor changes and much paraphrasing) from "Breads from the La Brea Bakery" 1993 by Nancy Silverton