

CARING FOR SOURDOUGH STARTER

Eli Rogosa <growseed.org>

Managing a sourdough starter is a mini-farming process. Sourdough culture contains wild yeast and lactobacilli bacteria that transform dough into more digestible, alive bread through a natural fermentation process. With simple care your culture will stay healthy for years. Many European cultures have been passed down from generation to generation. The wild yeast and lactobacilli arrive to you in a dormant stage and need to be activated by feeding flour and water before used for baking. Activation usually takes 3 to 5 days depending on the flour and temperature. Once activation is complete the culture can be used immediately or stored in the refrigerator indefinitely, but not frozen since some wild yeast do not survive freezing. When fully activated cultures are refrigerated for many weeks or months they again become partially dormant and may require reactivation depending on how long they have been dormant.

Culture Container: A quart wide mouth glass jar is good to maintain your starter. Each time more flour and water are added, the lactobacilli make it more acidic. You may need to discard part of the activating culture at each feeding or the mixture will overflow. This partially dilutes the acidity which favors the wild yeast. The jar lid should be loose with air flow.

Activation: Dilute the starter with a cup of warm spring or rain water, then mix in a cup of flour. *(If the fermentation is at close to 32oC (90oF), this temperature stimulates the lactobacilli to rapidly acidify the culture, preventing contamination by non-sourdough organisms found in almost all flours.)* After 24 hours a few bubbles appear as the first sign of growth and activity. Repeat the feedings at 12 hour intervals at room temperature 21oC (70oF) which favors the growth and activity of the wild yeast. Each feeding may require discarding some of the mixture or the jar will overflow. You may want to start a second jar to serve as a backup if required. Activation is complete when the foam and bubbles of the mixture increase the volume in the first jar by 2 to 3 inches within 2 to 4 hours of the last feeding. Now the culture is ready for baking or it can be refrigerated until needed. During refrigeration a clear light brown liquid (hooch) forms a layer on the surface. This is normal and is stirred back in when the culture is used.

Reactivation: When cultures are refrigerated they become partially dormant. To reactivate they are warmed up to room temperature, fed flour and water and are ready for use as soon as they begin to form a layer of foam and bubbles. If they have been dormant for only 1 to 2 weeks, the process is usually completed in 2-3 hours. If they have been dormant 3-4 weeks, the process may have to be repeated once or twice until activity is obvious.