

BEPS SOURDOUGH CULTCHA

The backstory

The culture you have is a rye sourdough leaven. It came to Australia from Bavaria 21 years ago with a woman named Helga. Most of its life it has been a plain sourdough leaven and lived on the edge of a forest near Stawell . More recently it moved to Brunswick and I started feeding it with rye flour.

Sourdough culture is a combination of wild yeast, bacteria and other organisms, flour and water. It needs to be kept in an environment in which these elements can grow and multiply.

I am not a baking expert. These notes are an amalgam of notes written by Helga Saunders, things I've read/been told and my own observations. The approach I can best recommend is to start experimenting.

General

Keep your culture in the fridge in a plastic container.

I bake with organic flours and this leaven has been maintained with organic flour, whether rye or unbleached plain.

I switched to feeding with rye flour because I am sometimes not a very regular baker and depending on what else is going on my leaven has to withstand periods of neglect. Rye flour maintains a very vigorous leaven. If you prefer you can feed this leaven with plain unbleached flour and 'morph it' back to a lighter leaven.

I sometimes alternate the two, one day rye, one day plain; maintaining a light-ish rye-ish leaven.

The rye leaven can be baked with rye flour, to produce a dark rye loaf or with plain unbleached flour to produce a 'light rye'. You can also use wholemeal flour, spelt, kamut or a mixture of any of the above.

A plain flour leaven can be baked with any of the above, it will be somewhat lighter. A plain flour leaven also lends itself to many other uses:

- Focaccia
- Pizza bases
- French loaves
- Roll or buns
- Sourdough chocolate cake
- Fruit breads
- Muffins

Some of these will work with a rye leaven, others not so well. Depending on how often you bake you may want to maintain two levains, one rye and one plain.

Nuts and seeds can be used to flavour your bread or you can try kibbled rye, soy grits or sprouted grains. Bavarian farmer's loaves use equal amounts of coriander, cumin or caraway and fennel.

This leaven has always been maintained on rainwater. Tap water contains chlorine which is not healthy for the bacteria in the leaven. Some people maintain leaven's on tap water successfully so this is your call. I used tap water once and my leaven nearly died. If you do use tap water try boiling it first and allowing to cool before adding to your leaven.

You don't have to use baking tins as many breads (think casalingas, foccacias, bread rolls etc) can be shaped with your hands and then baked on a flat baking

sheet. The rye leaven however often creates a mix that is too wet to hold its shape so tins may be necessary. Baking tins should be seasoned, in the same way that a good wok or frying pan is. Season your tins by rubbing with oil and placing in a hot oven for fifteen minutes. As you bake more your tins will blacken, indicating a well-seasoned tin.

Feeding

This is a general guide only. As you get to know your leaven and how it responds to different things you will work out the best way to manage it to suit your needs. These instructions will give you enough culture to bake two loaves every five days.

Store the leaven in a two litre plastic container. Each day add one cup of flour (rye to maintain it as a rye leaven, unbleached plain flour if you want to 'morph' it to a plain one) and one cup of water, preferably rainwater. Left over potato cooking water is also very good for it and you can save this in your fridge to use in place of normal water. Once you have two litres of culture you are ready to bake two loaves.

To bake less often feed half these amounts or every second day instead. When I am not doing much baking I tend to feed once a week; just enough to keep the culture alive.

If you need to quickly create more culture then you can feed it every six hours instead of once a day.

A healthy culture is stringy, smells sweet and feels glutinous. If you find that the water in your leaven is separating from the rest of it and collecting on the top then the culture is dying and needs to be rescued.

If your culture is looking lacklustre or ill, through neglect or too much tap water, then you can try adding some potato water or a boiled, mashed potato (no milk) which has been cooled.

Proofing

Proofing is the first step in bread making and will take between 6-10 hours. Just how long it takes will depend to a large extent on the ambient temperature. My kitchen is arctic in winter so I leave dough to proof in a sunny window or whilst I am baking/cooking and have an oven warming the kitchen. In summer it is best to proof in the refrigerator to avoid a dough explosion.

Handy times to proof may be overnight, baking in the morning, or during the day while you are working, whether at home or somewhere else.

- From your two litres of **culture** retain one cup to start feeding again.

- Place remainder into a large bowl. This will make two loaves of bread. You can use a machine if it has a dough hook. (and strong motor)
- Add 1 cup of **water**. (Ideally potato water or rainwater, tap water will do.)
- Add one tablespoon of **salt**.
- Optional – add one cup of **nuts, seeds or other flavourings**.
- Add four cups of **flour**. (Rye, unbleached plain, spelt, wholemeal, kamut or a mixture of several of these)
- Mix to a stiff dough with wooden spoon or dough hook.
- Cover bowl with a clean tea towel and allow to proof. Your dough will rise and puff on the surface.

Kneading

- Oil two seasoned baking tins.
- Pre-heat oven

Electric	230-250 C
Fan Forced	230-250 C
Gas	Highest possible setting
- Place a bowl of water in the oven to create extra moisture whilst the bread is baking.
- Spread one cup of flour around edges of bowl.
- Spread second cup of flour on kneading surface.
- Make sure everything is ready and in place as you will not be able to touch anything mid-kneading.
- Work the flour and dough from the edges of the bowl into the centre with your hands. Loosen all the dough from the sides.
- Tip dough onto the floured kneading surface.
- Gently fold the flour coated dough from the outside to the centre.
- Continually fold the dough over, and gently knead.

If you are using the rye leaven your dough may be too wet and sticky to knead very much and you may not be able to shape it into a loaf. It may look more like porridge than bread dough! Rye flours retain more water than others. This dough can be placed/scraped/poured into two baking tins. It will still come out fine.

Avoid adding extra flour to overcome a wet sticky dough, it will make your bread crumbly. If you must, add a third cup of flour at a maximum. If you are using a rye leaven then this will not help but it may with a plain flour mix.

- If you have morphed the leaven into a plain flour one or if your rye mix is not too wet then divide the kneaded dough into two, fold each portion up to ten times to seal the edges and shape into loaves.
- Make diagonal slashes on top of loaf.
- Place each loaf into a tin. (Alternatively you can bake the loaves on a baking sheet without tins)

- In winter you can now leave these to proof for another hour to produce a fluffier loaf. Don't try this in summer.

Baking

- Place loaves in pre-heated oven.
- After 15 mins turn temperature down to 190-200 C and bake for another 45 mins.
- Optional- Brush top of the loaf with cold water during final ten minutes to give a shiny crust.
- After one hour remove bread from oven and turn onto wire rack.

Sourdough bread is at its best twelve hours after it is baked if you can wait that long.

Cleaning

Sourdough mix sets like cement so it is best to clean your hands, utensils and bench as soon as possible. It will not be fun later.

Storage

Ensure loaf is completely cool before storing. I keep my loaves in a bread bin where they keep for two weeks in winter without going stale or mouldy. If you do want to freeze a loaf, place it in a plastic freezer bag while still hot. This provides moisture to prevent the bread from drying out in the freezer.

Recipes

Some of these recipes are best suited to a plain flour leaven, others will work well with a rye leaven.

You can make a richer dough by adding

- One cup of milk instead of the water
- Butter and/or cheese

Sourdough Muffins

2 eggs

.5 teaspoon of salt

60 grams of melted butter

4 cups of culture

.25 cup of honey

Optional - add one cup of nuts, berries, grated zucchini/ham/cheese or a mixture of these

Preheat oven to 220 C

Combine all ingredients in a bowl

Fill lined or well-greased muffin tins three quarters full with mixture

Bake for 20 mins.

Phil and Susie's Sourdough Chocolate Cake

Resources

There are of course hundreds of books and other resources about bread baking so I will only mention a couple that I have found really useful:

- *Bread Matters: Why and How to Make Your Own* by Andrew Whitley
- *Local Breads: Sourdough and Whole Grain Recipes from Europe's Best Artisan Bakers* by Daniel Leader
- <http://sourdough.com/>
- <http://www.danlepard.com/>

Absolutely brilliant sourdough chocolate cake recipe:
<http://blog.kingarthurfour.com/2008/09/11/sourdough-takes-the-chocolate-cake/>

Special thanks to Helga Saunders who brought this culture to Australia 21 years ago and has nurtured it ever since. You can contact Helga at hlgsaunders@yahoo.com She would love to hear about your adventures with sourdough!