

Ross's Fargo Fresh Sourdough Starter

I whelped "Herman," as sourdough starter is traditionally called, in about 1994. The original culture came from King Arthur Flour Co. in Vermont, described as a descendent of either an Alaskan Gold Rush starter or a colonial American starter. After spending a quarter century in Fargo, however, and consistently fed with



Dakota Maid flour from North Dakota Mills, it undoubtedly has taken on a north country personality. So it legitimately can be called a taste of Fargo, you betcha.

Be sure to feed your Fargo starter as soon as you get it by adding a cup of flour and enough water to make a thick paste. I maintain my starter in a small crockery jar with a loose lid in the back of the refrigerator. About once every three weeks I spoon out about a cup of starter,

leaving about a half cup. If I want to bake or increase the starter, I keep what I've removed. If not, always with sadness, I throw it out. I feed what's left with a cup of flour and enough cool water to stir to a thick paste. Then back to the fridge.

If you have forgotten the starter a few weeks it may form a slightly moldy crust on top or along the sides of the jar. Don't despair! I carefully scrape the crust off the top with a spoon, and throw away. With a different spoon I remove the rest of the starter to a bowl. Then I wash and thoroughly rinse the jar, return about a half-cup of starter, then add the flour and water. I have done this a couple dozen times over the years with no untoward results.

You may alternatively see a blackish liquid collected at the top of a neglected starter. This is actually alcohol from the fermented yeast! Don't worry. Pour it off and feed. I have never tried to drink it, but maybe on the rocks?

I suspect, however, if you don't get back to your starter for a couple months it may perish, and you should be ashamed of yourself. (But let me know and after a brisk talking-to I'll re-equip you.) Online tutorials say if you plan to be away for an extended period you can freeze or dry a starter, but I have not tried either of these. Last time I was away that long I entrusted Herman with my aunt.

You can find a lot of recipes for sourdough, but below is one I've used successfully for bread. The proportions are from the King Arthur company, but I've adapted the method.

Sourdough bread (makes two loaves)

1 cup sourdough starter.

Ross's note: I usually remove one cup from the container to a bowl, then add a cup of flour and enough water for a thick slurry. I leave it at least overnight to

develop flavor, but if I have time I like to leave it two days in a loosely covered bowl on the counter, to develop some real personality.

1½ cups lukewarm water.
1 packet instant dry yeast.
2½ tsp. salt.
4-5 cups flour.

Dissolve yeast in the warm water in large bowl.

Ross's note: You may wonder why we use yeast. Isn't sourdough alone a leavener? Well, yes, and I've tried it. But wild yeasts are apparently a bit lazy, as bread leavened with starter alone doesn't rise so much. Adding commercial yeast helps fluff up the loaf. But there's a trade-off: the sourdough tang is not as pronounced. Your call.

Add one cup flour.

Stir in salt. Add second cup flour.

Stir in sourdough starter. Add enough flour so dough becomes hard to stir.

Turn out onto large board or marble countertop. Knead 8-10 minutes to form cohesive dough, adding flour as necessary to keep from sticking.

Coat another bowl with cooking spray. Move dough to bowl, turning it so that cooking spray coats (keeps dough from drying out).

Cover with plastic wrap. Move to warm place to rise.

Ross's note: I put it in the nice cozy microwave with a glass of hot water. Remember not to turn on microwave.

After dough has about doubled in bulk, punch down gently, remove from bowl to board.

Cut dough in half. Shape to two oval loaves if free-form on baking sheet, or oblong loaves for loafing pans. Apply cooking spray before moving loaves to sheet or pan.

Ross's note: The free-form shape seems to have a bit more sourdough flavor, but makes a fairly flat loaf. I prefer the loaf pan size for convenience.)

Cut diagonal slashes in each loaf.

Let rise a second time.

Ross's note: I like to put it in cold oven to avoid drafts, but don't absent-mindedly preheat the oven.

When loaves are almost up to top of pan or have risen on baking sheet as you think appropriate (a couple hours), remove from oven. Preheat to 425 degrees F.

Mist loaves with lukewarm water (for a more crispy top) and bake 20-30 minutes.

Cool on rack.

Find my favorite recipes at www.rossfcollins.com, "Stories" pulldown.