Field Notes on Slow Bread

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A small book about flour, water, time and patience

Mara Quill

Small Oven Press

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For everyone who has ever said “just one more loaf.”

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Chapter 1

The Starter

Every loaf in this book begins with a jar on the counter. Inside it lives a colony of wild yeasts and lactic acid bacteria, fed on nothing more than flour and water. It is the oldest leavening there is, and it asks for very little: a feed once or twice a day, a warm corner, and somebody who notices when it is hungry.

People talk about starters as if they were pets. That is not quite right. A pet needs you; a starter merely tolerates you. Leave it in the fridge for a month and it will sulk, turn grey and grow a layer of dark liquid on top,[1] but two or three feeds will bring it back. It is hard to kill a starter. It is easy to make one that is weak.

Beginning one

You need a clean jar, a spoon, wholegrain rye or wholemeal flour for the first few days, and water that has not been heavily chlorinated. Mix equal weights of flour and water, about 50 grams of each, into a thick paste. Cover the jar loosely and leave it somewhere around 24 to 26 °C.

For the next week:

1. Each day, discard all but about 50 grams of the mixture.
2. Feed what remains with 50 grams of flour and 50 grams of water.

3. Mark the level on the jar with a rubber band and note how far it rises.

Around day three it will bubble enthusiastically and smell strange, sometimes like old cheese or nail varnish. This is not the starter you want; it is a crowd of bacteria that arrive first and leave as the mixture sours. By day six or seven the smell settles into something clean, yeasty and gently sour, and the rise becomes predictable.



A starter at its peak, roughly doubled since its last feed.

Knowing when it is ready

A starter is ready to bake with when it doubles within four to eight hours of a feed, every feed, for two or three days in a row. Bakers sometimes drop a spoonful into water to see whether it floats. The float test is better than nothing, but a dense, wholegrain starter can be perfectly strong and still sink. Trust the doubling.

> A starter is a clock you set with flour. Feed it at the same time each day and it will tell you the time.

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Once it is strong, you can slow it down. Keep it in the fridge between bakes and feed it once a week. The night before you want to bake, take it out, feed it, and let it wake up on the counter.

Notes

1. Bakers call this liquid “hooch”. It is alcohol produced by hungry yeast. Stir it back in for a more sour loaf or pour it off for a milder one.

Chapter 2

Reading the Dough

Recipes give times. Dough does not read recipes. The same mixture that is ready in four hours in a July kitchen may need nine in January, and the only reliable guide is the dough itself. This chapter is about learning to look.

The first mix

Start with a simple formula, expressed the way bakers express everything, as a percentage of the flour:

- 100% strong white bread flour (say 500 grams)
- 72% water (360 grams)
- 20% ripe starter (100 grams)
- 2% salt (10 grams)

Mix the flour and most of the water until no dry flour remains, and leave it for half an hour. This rest, which bakers call the *autolyse*, lets the flour absorb the water and start forming gluten on its own. Then add the starter, the salt and the last of the water, and squeeze everything together until it feels like one smooth mass.

Folding instead of kneading

Slow dough builds strength through time and a few gentle folds. Every half hour for the first two hours, wet your hand, lift one side of the dough, stretch it up until it resists, and fold it over the top. Turn the bowl a quarter and repeat four times. After the third or fourth set, the dough will hold its shape, feel smooth, and stretch into a thin translucent sheet without tearing.

Signs of a good rise

The bulk rise is finished not when the timer says so, but when the dough shows these signs together:

- it has grown by about half, not doubled;
- the surface is domed and slightly glossy, with a few bubbles at the edges;
- it jiggles as one piece when you shake the bowl;
- it feels airy and lighter than it looks.

Stop too early and the loaf will be tight and gummy. Go too far and the dough loses its strength, spreading flat in the oven. Most beginners stop too early. If you are not sure, wait another thirty minutes and look again.[1]

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Now shape it. Tip the dough onto a lightly floured counter, fold the edges into the middle to make a rough ball, flip it, and drag it towards you a few times to tighten the surface. Let it rest, shape it once more into its final form, and lay it seam side up in a floured basket.

Notes

1. A probe thermometer helps more than any timer. Dough at 26 °C rises roughly twice as fast as dough at 20 °C.

Chapter 3

The Bake

The basket goes into the fridge overnight. Cold slows the yeast almost to a stop while the bacteria keep working, which deepens the flavour and firms the dough so it is easier to score. It also means you can bake in the morning, when the house is quiet.

Heat and steam

A home oven is too dry for bread. Professional ovens inject steam in the first minutes of baking, which keeps the crust soft long enough for the loaf to expand fully. At home, a heavy lidded pot does the same job: the dough's own moisture fills the closed space.

Put the empty pot in the oven and heat both to 250 °C for 45 minutes. A pot that is not fully hot gives a pale, flat loaf.

Scoring

Turn the cold dough out onto a sheet of baking paper and cut it with a razor blade or a very sharp knife, one confident stroke about a centimetre deep, held at a shallow angle. The cut tells the loaf where to open. Without it, the crust tears wherever it is weakest.

Lower the dough into the pot by the paper, put the lid on, and bake:

1. 20 minutes with the lid on at 250 °C;
2. 20 to 25 minutes with the lid off at 230 °C, until the crust is a deep chestnut brown.

Darker than you think is usually right. A pale crust tastes of very little; a well-browned one tastes of caramel and toasted nuts.

Waiting

The hardest instruction in this book: let the loaf cool for at least an hour before you cut it. Bread is still baking as it cools, the crumb setting as steam escapes. Cut it hot and the inside will be gummy, however perfect the bake.

Listen as it cools. A good crust crackles quietly for the first few minutes, a sound bakers call the loaf “singing”.

Chapter 4

When It Goes Wrong

Every baker has a shelf of failures. The trick is to read them, because a bad loaf almost always tells you exactly what happened.

Flat and spreading

A loaf that spreads like a pancake usually has one of three causes: the starter was weak, the dough was over-proofed, or the surface was not shaped tightly enough. Check the starter first. If it was doubling reliably, shorten the bulk rise next time by an hour, and spend longer tightening the surface when shaping.

Dense with large holes at the top

This is the classic sign of under-proofing. The yeast had not made enough gas before the oven, so the loaf rose in a hurry, opening a tunnel under the crust and leaving the bottom tight. Let the bulk rise run longer and look for the signs in Reading the Dough rather than the clock.

Too sour

Sourness comes from the bacteria, which like it cool and slow. To soften it, use a younger starter, fed four to six hours before mixing

rather than twelve, and keep the dough warmer during the bulk rise.

Burnt base

Put a baking tray on the shelf below the pot for the second half of the bake, or slide a sheet of baking paper folded double under the loaf.



Keep a notebook. Write down the date, the temperature in the kitchen, how long each stage took and what the loaf looked like. After ten loaves you will know your kitchen better than any recipe does, and that, more than any formula, is what makes good bread.