

The Sourdough Starter Field Guide

From flour-and-water to a loaf with an open crumb

Sourdough is just flour, water, salt and time — but the wild-yeast starter is where people get stuck. This guide gets you from day one to a reliable, bubbly starter and your first proper bake.

Build your starter (7 days)

- Day 1: mix 50g whole-wheat or rye flour + 50g lukewarm water in a jar. Loose lid.
- Days 2-6: discard all but ~50g, feed 50g flour + 50g water once daily (twice in warm rooms).
- Ready when it reliably doubles in 4-8 hours and smells tangy-sweet, not like nail polish.

Your first loaf (the basics)

- Levain: feed starter the night before; use when it floats in water.
- Autolyse: mix flour + water, rest 30-60 min before adding levain and salt.
- Bulk ferment: 3-5 stretch-and-folds over 4-6 hrs at room temp until ~50% risen.
- Shape, cold-proof in the fridge overnight, bake at 245C/475F in a Dutch oven (lid on 20 min, off 20-25 min).

Why your loaf failed (quick fixes)

- Flat/dense: under-proofed or weak starter. Give it more time / a stronger feed.
- Gummy crumb: under-baked or sliced too hot. Bake longer, cool fully (2+ hrs).
- No ears: not enough tension at shaping, or score too shallow. Score at a 45° angle.

Insider glossary

Levain — An offshoot of your starter built specifically for one bake.

Autolyse — Resting flour + water before salt/levain to build gluten passively.

Crumb — The interior texture/holes of the baked loaf.

Hooch — The grey liquid on a hungry starter — pour off or stir in, then feed.

Starter checklist

- Jar + loose lid
- Kitchen scale (grams)

- Whole-grain + bread flour
- Dutch oven
- Bench scraper
- Banneton or bowl + tea towel

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