

The Ultimate Sourdough Journey

by Samantha TerAvest

The dough coming out of my bowl should not be the consistency of soup. But here I am, pouring all of it out onto the counter, trying to hold back tears. I would not have thought in a million years that making a simple loaf of bread would cause me so much stress.

It's Christmas break and my mission is to start eating more whole foods. Relaxing in the kitchen endlessly scrolling on TikTok, a video of sourdough bread pops up on my feed. I realize it's only the simple ingredients of flour, water, and salt. This is all I need to know to ditch my store-bought bread that contains many harsh ingredients and preservatives. Sourdough doesn't use a typical yeast you find in the baking aisle at the grocery store. Instead, it needs a "starter," which actively grows wild yeast and good bacteria that will allow the bread to rise. Additionally, it's better for your gut health because it's easier to digest.

I start to prepare my ingredients for the starter. First I grab the fancy digital scale from the cupboard and flour from the lazy susan. Then the water from the tap is placed into the microwave for exactly 13 seconds. I swirl my finger in the water checking the temperature so it's just warmer than room temperature, not caring that it was not sanitary at all. I combine equal parts water and flour then vigorously mix into a pancake-like consistency. I mean It seems easy enough, for being known as the best baker in my whole family, this shouldn't be hard to do.

I continued a ratio of one part starter to two parts water and flour for almost a week and a half. I decided it was time for my first trial run. I googled a beginner's recipe

for sourdough bread and gingerly read through the instructions. To my surprise, I'm completely lost. It's telling me to stretch and fold, bulk ferment, and proof the dough. My breath starts to quicken and I'm getting more agitated by the second. This is very frustrating, I have no idea what I'm supposed to do.

I have always been ambitious so I started anyway. This leads me to guess at the unclear instructions making a mess of the whole kitchen. My mom walks in confused and asks, "What are you doing?"

I snap, "Mom, obviously as you can see I don't know. So don't expect it to turn out."

Stunned by my response, all she says is, "Well, I'm just going to let you handle it," and leaves the room.

I trudged through a whole two-day process for a single loaf of bread. It turns out like a flat disc which has me realizing this might be more difficult than I anticipated. The next week I tried two more times, and again the loaves came out rubbery and flat. At this point it's embarrassing. In the beginning, I talked myself up to my aunt about how nice it was going to be to have fresh bread. With the defeat of not being able to successfully make a single loaf, I haven't dared to talk about it again.

I felt like this whole process was just wasting my time, ingredients, and self-esteem. That week I didn't even try to make another batch until I found a video that goes step by step. Finally, I was able to grasp the understanding of the techniques. So, I decided to try again.

After I mixed the ingredients, for the next 2 hours I did a series of 4 stretch and folds. The video told me to leave the dough alone for anywhere from 4-10 hours to

double in size for the bulk fermentation. I decided to let it rest until I got back home from work, about 9 hours.

Dusting the counter with flour so the dough would be easier to work with. I was finally ready to shape the sourdough. I grab the bowl, take off the plastic wrap, and instantly freeze in place. The dough has almost liquified, it jiggled when I set it down as if it were slime. I just hope that maybe it was just the top layer that had gotten that way. I set my fear aside and started to pour it out. In the video, it took a minute to let gravity do its work and drop out in one big glob. Well, mine did not look like that. As I tip the bowl, it all just starts oozing out looking like a spider web from all the gas bubbles. Crackling and popping as it hits the counter, there's no stopping it. Suddenly, it took up the whole counter. Freaking out, I can only think of scooping it into the center of the counter. The mixture slips and slides through my fingers, I struggle to keep it from making an even bigger mess.

I rush to the pantry, snag the flour, and pour a mound onto the soup of dough. Massaging it in, I start to form a dough again. Stepping back I looked at the catastrophe I had just made. It was like a winter wonderland in my kitchen. Flour had coated everything I touched, including me. I was over this stupid mess. Quickly, I snatch up a rag to clean up and go straight to bed.

In the morning I was woken up by an angry mama bear. Apparently, my cleaning skills weren't up to par last night for there was still flour all over the counter and floor. Thankfully, she had already cleaned it all up. I went to take a peek at the dough praying it was usable. I look at it and all hope is out the door. Overnight it formed a hard shell, covering the top layer of dough, and went from a light yellow to a brown color. I walked it

straight to the trash. I don't know why I was thinking that it could've been fine and turned out like everybody else's. I'm nothing but constantly failing.

I'm walking to my room and before I leave the kitchen, my mom catches me. She says, "Just keep trying, Sam. Start tweaking little things and be patient. It will come together eventually." I agreed with her and headed to my room.

I'm reflecting on what my mom said and the realization hits me that I was about to give up. And I am no quitter. So I dialed in and watched the tutorial video one more time to figure out what happened that made mine turn out like it did. I decided that the problem was that I let it bulk ferment for too long. The next time I was only going to wait until the dough was twice its size.

I started yet another attempt to make sourdough. After the stretch and folds, I let it bulk ferment. I babysat it for about 3 hours constantly checking in until it just doubled in size. Dancing around the kitchen because it looks just like the one in the video. I'm beaming with excitement and my confidence is through the roof while I shape the dough into a loaf. It proofs overnight in the fridge so tomorrow it's ready to bake.

As soon as the dismissal bell rang at school, I bee-lined it out the door and was the first one out of the parking lot rushing home. Wasting no time getting started, I preheat the oven. Then, prepping the dough by gently picking it up and placing it on parchment paper, I score it with a sharp knife so it's able to get a good rise. I drop it into the Dutch oven, put on the lid, and shove it into the oven for 25 minutes. I have to walk away, the idea of it not turning out once again is driving me crazy.

The timer starts blaring through the whole house. I throw off my blanket, the remote goes flying, and my dog gets startled as I jump up and run to the oven.

Rounding the corner, my socks meet the wood floor and I almost crack my head open on the edge of the island. Pressing all the buttons I turn off the timer. I swing open the oven door and a wave of the most delicious smell hits me in the face. I take off the lid and scream at the top of my lungs to my dog, "It's perfect!" She gets just as excited and does her zoomies around the house. Quickly putting the lid on the stove, I shut the oven door to keep the heat in.

This is my first bread to finally rise properly. Every other loaf I tried to bake was maybe half this one's size. It bakes for 15 more minutes without the lid to become golden and it's done. After a whole month and a half, I can make a loaf of sourdough bread.

I slice into my bread, it's so soft and the crust is perfect. Just enough crisp, but not too much. I give my parents a piece and my dad devours it, even going out of his way to tell my uncle and cousin about how tasty it is.

When I think back to all the failures. How I felt discouraged every time I threw away failed attempts and defeated from the wasted time. Even when I thought that I finally got it figured out, the next trial would end up being worse. This journey was super challenging both mentally and physically. However, the satisfaction when I first saw it come out of the oven perfect, the positive feedback from my parents, and the knowledge that I could have my own fresh and healthy bread whenever I wanted, made it all worth it.