THE STARTER BINDER

Sourdough Starter & Maintenance Guide

Build a starter in 7 days, keep it alive forever — feeding schedules, troubleshooting, a printable feed log, and a bake-day timeline.

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From flour and water to a real starter

A sourdough starter is just a stable colony of wild yeast and lactobacilli living in a jar of flour-water paste. Building one takes 7–14 days. Maintaining it takes 30 seconds a day. This guide gets you both.

Day-by-day build schedule

Use 50 g whole-wheat flour or rye for the first 3 days — they ferment faster than white flour and get you to a live starter sooner. Switch to bread flour from Day 4 onward.

Day	Discard	Add	Look for
1	—	50 g whole wheat flour + 50 g warm water (78°F)	Combine, cover loosely, rest 24 h
2	—	Stir, look for bubbles	A few bubbles, slight rise
3	50 g of mix	50 g whole wheat + 50 g water	More bubbles, smells vinegary
4	50 g	50 g bread flour + 50 g water	Doubles in 12 h, smells yeasty
5	50 g	50 g bread flour + 50 g water	Doubles in 8 h, ropy strands
6	50 g	50 g bread flour + 50 g water	Doubles in 6 h
7	50 g	50 g bread flour + 50 g water	Doubles in 4–5 h — ready

The 'doubles in 4 hours' test

A starter is bake-ready when it reliably doubles in 4–5 hours at room temperature (72–76°F). Put a rubber band around the jar at feed time. If the line rises past 2× by hour 5, you're ready to mix dough.

Daily / weekly maintenance schedules

Pick the schedule that matches how often you bake. All assume a 1:5:5 feeding ratio by weight.

Bake frequency	Where it lives	Feed schedule	Notes
Daily	Counter (72–76°F)	1× daily, ~12 h before bake	Discard before each feed
2–3× per week	Counter	1× daily, 1:5:5	Same as daily; refresh 8 h pre-bake
Weekly	Fridge	1× per week, 1:5:5	Pull out 24 h pre-bake, 2 feeds
Monthly	Fridge (lid sealed)	1× per 2–3 weeks	Pull out 48 h pre-bake, 3 feeds

Feeding worksheet

Math by ratio so you can scale up or down. Default is 1:5:5 (1 part starter : 5 parts flour : 5 parts water).

Starter at feed time	_____ g
Flour to add (5×)	_____ g
Water to add (5×)	_____ g (78°F)
Resulting jar weight	_____ g
Peak time observed	_____ hours

Feed log (7-day printable)

Date	Time	Starter g	Flour g	Water g	Peak hr	Notes

Troubleshooting

Smells like acetone or nail polish	Hungry. Feed at 1:7:7 ratio for 2 cycles.
Brown liquid on top ('hooch')	Hungry. Pour off the hooch or stir back in for tang. Feed.
No bubbles after Day 3	Too cold. Move to a warmer spot (top of fridge, near oven light).
Pink, orange, or fuzzy mold	Toss the whole jar and start over. Mold is the only failure mode that matters.
Doubles but is loose / runny	Drop to 80% hydration: 1:5:4 ratio.
Doubles but is stiff and slow	Increase to 100% hydration. Use bread flour, not all-purpose.
Starter floats but bread is dense	Use the rubber-band test, not the float test. Float test is unreliable.

Bake-day timing cheat sheet

Hour	Action	Why
T-12 h	Feed starter at 1:5:5	Build to peak overnight
T-0	Mix dough (autolyse 30 min)	Hydrate flour before salt
T+0:30	Add salt + starter, mix	Develop gluten
T+1 to T+4	Stretch + fold every 30 min	Build strength
T+5	End of bulk ferment (50% rise)	Pre-shape
T+5:30	Final shape into banneton	Surface tension
T+6 to next day	Cold retard in fridge	Flavor + scoring control
Bake day	Preheat Dutch oven 1 h at 500°F	Steam + spring
Bake	20 min lid on at 500°F, 20 min lid off at 450°F	Crust + crumb

None of this is legal advice. Verify with your state's department of agriculture, your local health department, and your city or county planning office before relying on any of it.