

## STARTER FOR SOUR DOUGH BREAD

Into a gallon crock put four cups of flour, two tablespoons of sugar (optional), two teaspoons of salt (though many experts prefer to add the salt later, to the actual dough), a tablespoon of vinegar and enough water to make a light, syrupy batter. Cover the crock loosely (cheesecloth will do) and keep it warm, not hot.

Here variation rears its head. Depending upon temperature, possibly humidity, even altitude (about this I cannot say)—not excluding other, minor, factors—the mixture can be ready for use within three days or as long as ten days. If very much clear yellow liquid forms on top, pour it off, add more flour and water—and wait. Properly and ideally, the mixture will bubble, froth, emit a pleasantly sour odor and increase in volume.

Pour all but about a cupful (you must leave this for the new “starter”) into a large mixing bowl. Add a tablespoon of cooking oil and a tiny amount of baking soda. Not much: just a wee bit. For bread, add flour until you have a thick, resilient, bouncy and slick dough. Work fast and *don't knead too much*. Gas is what makes the sourdough products light and fluffy, and we've found you can easily push all those thousands of gas bubbles out of the dough. Other breads perhaps need more kneading, but I believe that is because they contain more vigorous gas-inducing yeasts. I have *flattened* sourdough, but never will again.

For bread, cut chunks of the usual size to fill half of a well-greased bread pan. If, like us, you prefer the French-type loaf, you shape and bake it on a salted flat sheet. Of course, before putting it into the heated (375°F.) oven you must wait until the dough, in a warm place, at least doubles in volume. Bake until the crust is brown.

Biscuits ought to be quickly rolled, cut and popped into the hot (425°F) oven. For hotcakes, just make a looser batter (less flour). They're better if you add a little sugar and egg(s).

To the cup of “starter” left in the crock, add flour and tepid water to its original level. If kept warm it will be ready within 24 hours. Sourdough crocks have been kept alive for decades, much like the old hearth fires in Tennessee that have been kept burning for generations. It was a source of pride with northern pioneers to have a “vintage” sourdough mixture, and they truly felt it improved with age.

You can if you wish force the initial starter with commercial yeast, but the purists among us feel this step unnecessary if not downright unsporting.

If you haven't as yet luxuriated with home-grown sourdough, chances are you're in for a rare treat. It's a wonderful, novel and welcome complement to meals afield—in tent camps, in trailers and pickup coaches and even at home. We have it afield—and at home, regularly. If it sounds a bit complicated as compared with opening a box of mix from the supermarket, why, perhaps it is. Yet there is something pleasantly nostalgic about the traditional, genuine, pure-quill old-fashioned product handed down from our forebears.