

# **Sourdough Science - Understanding Fermentation**

**Zea Heptinstall**

# Introduction

Baking sourdough bread is both an art and a science. While many bakers focus on the art—the shaping, the scoring, the baking—understanding the science behind sourdough fermentation can elevate your baking to the next level. This guide will introduce you to the fascinating world of sourdough fermentation, explaining how yeast and bacteria work together to create the delicious, tangy bread that we all love. By delving into the specifics of fermentation, you'll gain the knowledge to troubleshoot, experiment, and ultimately perfect your sourdough creations.

## **What is fermentation**

Fermentation is a natural metabolic process where microorganisms like yeast and bacteria convert sugars into alcohol, gases, and acids. This process is essential in baking because it produces the carbon dioxide that helps dough rise and the organic acids that give sourdough its distinctive flavor.

In sourdough baking, fermentation involves a symbiotic relationship between wild yeast and lactic acid bacteria. These microorganisms work together to leaven the dough and develop the complex flavors characteristic of sourdough bread. Unlike commercial bread, which relies on a single strain of baker's yeast, sourdough fermentation is driven by a diverse community of wild yeasts and bacteria, each contributing to the bread's unique texture and taste.

# The Microorganism Involved

## 1. Baking: Wild Yeast

**Diversity and Origin:** Wild yeast is not a single species but rather a collection of various yeast strains naturally present in the environment. These yeasts can be found on the surface of grains, in the air, and even on the skin of fruits. Each region has its own unique strains of wild yeast, which is why sourdough starters can vary significantly from one location to another.

**Role in Fermentation:** Wild yeast feeds on the sugars present in flour, primarily glucose and maltose, converting them into carbon dioxide and alcohol. The carbon dioxide is what causes the dough to rise, while the alcohol evaporates during baking. Wild yeast ferments more slowly than commercial baker's yeast, which allows for a longer fermentation period and the development of more complex flavors.

## 2. Lactic Acid Bacteria (LAB)

**Types of LAB:** The primary types of lactic acid bacteria found in sourdough are *Lactobacillus*, *Pediococcus*, *Leuconostoc*, and *Weissella*. These bacteria thrive in the acidic environment of a sourdough starter, where they outcompete other microorganisms that might spoil the dough.

**Production of Acids:** Lactic acid bacteria produce two types of acids during fermentation: lactic acid and acetic acid. Lactic acid gives sourdough its mild, creamy tang, while acetic acid provides a sharper, more vinegary flavor. The balance between these acids can be influenced by fermentation conditions, such as temperature and hydration level.

**Health Benefits:** In addition to their role in flavor development, lactic acid bacteria contribute to the health benefits of sourdough. The acids they produce lower the pH of the dough, which can help to break down phytic acid in the flour, making minerals like iron, zinc, and magnesium more bioavailable. Some studies also suggest that sourdough bread may have a lower glycemic index than other types of bread, making it a better option for people managing blood sugar levels.

# The Fermentation Process

## 1. Mixing

**Hydration and Enzymes:** When flour and water are first mixed, the water activates enzymes in the flour that begin breaking down starches into simpler sugars, which the yeast and bacteria can consume. This phase is crucial for setting the stage for fermentation, as it determines the availability of nutrients for the microorganisms.

**Autolysis:** Some bakers use an initial resting period called autolysis, where the dough is allowed to sit after the initial mix but before adding salt or the sourdough starter. This step helps to develop gluten, improve dough elasticity, and enhance the final texture of the bread.

## 2. First Fermentation (Bulk Fermentation)

**Gluten Development:** During bulk fermentation, the dough's gluten network is developed through the process of stretching and folding. This gluten network traps the carbon dioxide produced by the yeast, giving the bread its structure and rise. The length of the bulk fermentation can vary depending on factors such as room temperature, the strength of the starter, and the desired flavor profile.

**Flavor Development:** The acids produced by the lactic acid bacteria during this phase contribute to the flavor of the bread. A longer bulk fermentation at a cooler temperature will generally result in a more pronounced sour flavor, while a shorter, warmer fermentation will produce a milder taste.

## 3. Proofing (Second Fermentation)

**Shaping and Tension:** After the bulk fermentation, the dough is shaped into its final form. Proper shaping creates surface tension, which helps the dough maintain its shape during the final proofing and baking stages. It's during proofing that the dough's final rise occurs, with the remaining sugars being consumed by the yeast and bacteria.

**Proofing Conditions:** Proofing can be done at room temperature or in the refrigerator (a method known as retarding). Retarding the dough slows down fermentation, allowing more time for flavor development and making it easier to schedule baking. A well-proofed dough will have a light, airy structure and a slight jiggle when moved.

# Factors Influencing Fermentation

## 1. Temperature

- **Impact on Yeast and Bacteria:** Temperature plays a critical role in fermentation. Yeast is more active at higher temperatures, which accelerates the rise but can lead to less complex flavors. Lactic acid bacteria, on the other hand, thrive at slightly cooler temperatures, where they produce more acetic acid. Managing temperature allows bakers to control the balance between yeast and bacteria, tailoring the flavor and texture of the bread to their preference.
- **Practical Tips:** To achieve a more sour flavor, ferment your dough in a cooler environment (around 65-70°F or 18-21°C). For a milder flavor and faster rise, ferment in a warmer environment (75-80°F or 24-27°C). Using a proofing box or your oven with the light on can help maintain a consistent temperature.

## 2. Hydration

- **High Hydration Doughs:** Doughs with higher hydration levels (75% and above) tend to ferment faster because the increased water content makes it easier for the yeast and bacteria to move through the dough and access sugars. High hydration doughs typically result in a more open crumb structure, with larger air pockets, which is desirable in certain types of bread like ciabatta.
- **Low Hydration Doughs:** Lower hydration doughs ferment more slowly and produce a tighter crumb structure. These doughs are easier to handle and shape but may require longer fermentation times to develop sufficient flavor and texture.

## 3. Flour Type

- **Whole Grains vs. White Flour:** Whole grain flours contain more nutrients than white flours, including bran and germ, which provide additional food for the yeast and bacteria. This can lead to a more vigorous fermentation and a more robust flavor. However, the bran in whole grains can also interfere with gluten development, leading to a denser loaf.
- **Rye Flour:** Rye flour is particularly rich in sugars and is often used in sourdough starters to encourage a strong fermentation. Rye also contains a type of starch called pentosans, which can trap more water and create a moister crumb.

## 4. Starter Maturity

- **Young vs. Mature Starter:** A young sourdough starter (less than a week old) may not have a fully developed microbial community, leading to weaker fermentation and

less flavor. A mature starter (several weeks or months old) has a well-established balance of yeast and bacteria, resulting in a more predictable and robust fermentation.

## Understanding Flavor Development

The flavor of sourdough bread is a product of the fermentation process, which balances the activity of yeast and lactic acid bacteria. Here's how different factors influence the final flavor of your bread:

- **Acidity Levels:** The production of lactic and acetic acids during fermentation determines the sourness of the bread. A longer, slower fermentation, particularly at cooler temperatures, will yield a tangier loaf due to increased acetic acid production. Conversely, a shorter, warmer fermentation will produce a milder flavor with more lactic acid.
- **Yeast Activity:** While yeast primarily contributes to the rise of the dough, its activity also affects flavor. More active yeast fermentation can lead to a sweeter, less sour bread, as the yeast consumes sugars more rapidly than the bacteria can produce acids.
- **Complexity of Flavors:** Sourdough's flavor complexity comes from the interplay of different strains of yeast and bacteria. The diversity of microorganisms in your starter and the conditions of fermentation create a unique flavor profile that can range from mildly tangy to deeply sour, with nuances of fruit, nuts, and even cheese-like notes.

## Troubleshooting Fermentation Issues

- **Dough Not Rising:** This could be due to weak yeast activity, often caused by a starter that isn't fully mature. Ensure your starter is bubbly and active before mixing your dough.
- **Overfermentation:** If your dough ferments for too long, it can become overly sour and lose its structure, resulting in a dense loaf. To avoid this, monitor your dough closely during the proofing stage, especially in warm environments.
- **Underfermentation:** If your bread is too dense or lacks flavor, it may not have fermented long enough. Extending the fermentation time or using warmer water can help boost yeast activity.