

SOURDOUGH TROUBLESHOOTING

Here is a list of the most common issues for bakers new to sourdough. Most problems can be caused by a various factors, with no single solution as such.

Don't be put off if your initial efforts were slightly disappointing. As with anything that requires a little skill, practise makes perfect.

BREAD IS DENSE

- Often due to low yeast activity, and underproved dough. Try proving at a warmer temperature and allowing more time
- Conversely, may also be due to overproved dough, especially if your dough had turned limp and sticky prior to shaping; reduce the proving time and prove at a cooler temperature if so.
- Your starter might also require some TLC; take it out of the fridge giving it a few daily feeds, discarding half the starter each day. Once it is doubling in size between feeds, revert to storing in the fridge, following the instructions as per the guide.

DOUGH IS GUMMY / BREAD CENTRE ISN'T BAKED

- Turn down your oven temperature and bake for slightly longer next time.

BREAD IS TOO SOUR

- Usually a sign that your starter has become too acidic. Check that you're using your starter at its peak level of activity i.e. the point it has doubled in size. Make sure you're storing your starter in the fridge between bakes.

FLOPPY DOUGH / DOUGH SPREADING BEFORE BAKING

- The dough might be too wet - check your measurements, and use less water next time.
- Under-active starter. Make sure it is stored in warm enough conditions during its pre-bake feed at around 25-28°C / 75-82°F.
- Dough is lacking gluten strength. Perform some additional stretch and folds during the first prove.
- Poor shaping; use wet fingers whilst handling dough, and work quickly. Be gentle and try not to knock air bubbles out of the dough.

DOUGH TOO WET TO WORK WITH

- Prove for less time and at a cooler temperature next time. Use the finger prod test as a guide to when to stop proving.
- Your dough may also be over-hydrated. Check your quantities, and try using less water next bake.

Over time, you will become better at handling wet doughs, especially as your bench knife skills improve.

DOUGH STICKS TO THE PROVING BASKET

- Use more flour when you dust your basket. A 50/50 mix of bread flour and rice flour is very good at preventing dough sticking to the basket.
- Season your basket; never clean it with water. Simply brush down between bakes and allow it to dry.

DOUGH DEFLATES BEFORE BAKING

- Usually due to the dough being overproved. After shaping, rest for less time and at a lower temperature. Also, be sure to bake the dough straight from the fridge.

THICK PALE CRUST

- Usually a sign of not enough steam being present during baking. Make sure that your iron pot has a well-fitting lid.
- Also check that the dough is sufficiently covered during proving and is not drying out. Check the dough isn't forming a thick, dry skin before it bakes.

LOAVES BURN EASILY

- Check that your oven temperature is accurate. An oven thermometer will confirm this. Also make sure your bread is being baked in the centre of the oven, where the temperature is likely to be more stable.

NO BIG BUBBLES IN CRUMB

- Could be due to an under-active starter; make sure it is stored in warm enough conditions during its pre-bake feed - around 25-28°C / 75-82°F.
- Dough might be too dry - check your water measurement.
- Make sure you performed an autolyse without salt.
- Was the dough proving temperature warm enough?
- Shape your dough more gently to avoid knocking out air bubbles.
- Increase the steam in your iron pot - spray with water using a fine mist spray and add ice cubes before you place on the lid and bake.

FLAT ROUNDED BREAD / LACK OF 'OVEN SPRING'

This could be a sign that the gluten is too strong, especially if the dough was proved at a warm enough temperature.

- Try adding more water to your dough next time.
- Make sure that your iron pot has a well-fitting lid.
- Reduce your future dough mixing time, and perform more stretch and folds during the first prove instead.
- If none of the above work, try a lower gluten flour.

MY SCORE DIDN'T OPEN UP / BREAD DOESN'T HAVE AN 'EAR'

- Not enough dough fermentation & development - i.e the dough was under-proved.
- Dough needs to be shaped better to create more tension in the dough before baking. This will come with more practice.
- Poor scoring: Is your blade razor-sharp? Did you score at the required shallow angle? (see guide).
- Not enough steam in your pot - lightly spray the dough and inside of pot with water from a fine mist sprayer bottle. Adding a few ice cubes before replacing the pot lid can also help generate steam.

BIG BUBBLES UNDER THE CRUST

- First prove may have taken place at too cool a temperature; prove at a warmer temperature next time - around 25-28°C / 75-82°F.
- Could also be due to a lack of strength in the dough. This can be remedied by more stretches and folds during proving and shaping.