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My History as Sourdough Bread Chef

I was busy with my job, so the jar of sourdough starter Nancy brought stayed in the refrigerator almost two weeks. Starter left too long will rot. I took the cap off and smelled it. It smelled like good, very sour starter, so I mixed flour and water for bread and stirred about two thirds of the starter into it. I added flour and water to the remaining starter to give it something to work on. I put the renewed starter in the refrigerator and left the mixed flour, water, and starter on the kitchen counter to work.

When I was a child, my family used to go to visit my mother's parents on the mining claim where they lived, near Jacksonville, Oregon.

They kept their food cool in a spring house. My grandmother and grandfather dug dirt and rock from the hill with pick and shovel and wheelbarrowed it to a wooden long tom and worked it with water from the creek. They took out enough gold to provide them a small amount of cash and legal rights to their claim.

Grandpa baked sourdough biscuits. They were light, fluffy, and delicious, without a trace of sourness. I didn't understand then that sourdough starter can be used sparingly as leavening without imparting a sour flavor.

Because sourdough starter can provide leavening with nothing needed but careful attention and flour and water added periodically, cooks carried it in their chuck wagons through cattle drives. Miners used sourdough starter. Where yeast was hard to get and keep and cooks wanted leavened bread, there was sourdough starter.

Sourdough starter can also be used to make the bread taste sour, and that is what I achieved twenty years ago, when I worked with it on Nimshew Ridge.

Joe brought me a small jar of starter. A friend brought it to him from a starter that had been kept going in Alaska for more than fifty years. Joe said he didn't want to use it, but he didn't

want it to go to waste.

I didn't know what to do with it from experience, but the brief instructions Joe had received made sense to me, "mix it with flour and water and keep adding flour and water to the starter every week or so," so I took it and started making bread. I like very sour bread, so that's what I aimed for.

My nose was my guide. I quickly learned that the flour and water mix that will be used as leavening has to be more liquid than bread dough or it will rise as it sours, expand out of its container, onto the table, over the edge, onto the floor, and it is very hard to clean up. Flour and water makes an effective paste. If it is sour, it doesn't inhibit its adhesive quality.

So the mix had to be just fluid enough that bubbles would rise through it. When it smelled sour enough, I set part of it aside for future starter, added flour to the rest of it until it was kneadable, kept adding flour until I could knead it without sticking to it, shaped it into a loaf, let it rise, and baked it in the oven of my wood-fired stove. Very good. Very sour.

The next lesson I learned was, if bread is left rising in the house, be sure the doors are tightly shut.

Friends came for a visit, and we went for a hike up the ridge. My dog, King Edward, followed his nose through a door left slightly ajar and ate both rising loaves. When we came back, we couldn't figure out what was the matter with him. He seemed quite happy, without pain, but he could hardly walk. He staggered, fell, dragged himself along with his front legs, worked at it a long time to stand, and fell again.

I took him to the vet, and the vet said, "This is a drunk dog."

I hadn't realized alcohol was part of the sourdough process, but the vet assured me that it is, though it evaporates during baking. Edward slept off his binge, and I started another batch of bread.

I moved to the cabin by the reservoir in early summer. Baking inside made the house unbearably hot, so I dug into the cutbank above the cabin parking area, set in a twenty-gallon, steel drum, covered it with two feet of dirt, with an exhaust pipe coming up from the hole I punched in the back of the drum and a sliding asbestos door in front, bricks inside to level the bottom, and I had an earth oven.

I built a hot fire inside the oven, let it burn about half an hour, raked out the coals and ashes, capped the pipe and

covered the cap with dirt, put bread dough into the oven, and slid the door down. I waited about forty-five minutes, opened the oven, and took out beautiful loaves of bread.

I made sourdough rye, white, and whole-wheat bread. Before baking, I brushed egg whites on the loaves and had a glazed, golden crust. I brushed on butter and had a softer, golden crust. I added food yeast to my dough, oatmeal, finely ground cornmeal, bran, wheat germ, anything that seemed like it would work, and everything I baked was delicious.

The whole-grain flours made dense, heavy bread, but I liked that quite well, as did most of the people who tried it. I winnowed out fans of light, fluffy bread and didn't give them a second helping.

Bread became a major part of my diet and of the diet of my most frequent visitors. I had no refrigeration, so I had to keep producing a lot of bread to keep the starter from souring.

Then I got hit by a drunk driver and didn't get back to the cabin for more than a month. By then, the starter had rotted.

I've had a few short involvements with sourdough since then. Sometimes, I've developed a starter just by mixing flour and water and letting it stand. Here again, my nose is my guide. If it develops a sour smell without smelling like rot, it's good.

But it's been years since I've done anything, and I don't remember all of it, so now it's a process of jogging my memory and experimenting again.

The first loaves of white bread were popular with my wife and daughters. The second batch, a loaf of white and a loaf of whole wheat, went rapidly. I tried half barley flour and half white the next time. We ate it, but it wasn't as popular, a little too sweet.

We haven't been able to get rye flour at local stores. I mean to speak to the managers. Meanwhile, a bowl of whole wheat and a bowl of white sour on the mantel.

Sourness is a function of time and temperature. The more of either, the sourer, though too long or too warm will over proof. The starter will die and the bread won't rise. I mean to find out more about starters. I'd like to know if the fifty-year-old Alaskan starter was any different from what I have now. I'll see what I can find at the library.

Meanwhile, primary research, in the jar, in the bowl, in the oven, through the sense of smell, over the taste buds proceeds full speed.