

Sourdough Ciabatta

Introduction

Flour: I use unbleached baker's flour from the supermarket. Choose something with a high protein content.

Baker's percentage: proportion of ingredient in relation to flour (this is not the mathematical percentage).

Eg. If you add 100g of rye flour to 1kg of white flour, then baker's percentage of rye = $100/1000 \times 100 = 10\%$ (mathematical percentage would be $100 / (100 + 1000) \times 100 = 9\%$ approximately).

Hydration: baker's percentage of water in the dough. Starter is normally 100% hydrated. That is, half water, half flour (by weight).

Starter (or mother starter): This is the starter kept in a jar, usually at 100% hydration.

Sponge (or baker's starter): The sponge is the first stage of fermentation. It is also 100% hydrated, making it identical in composition to the starter.

Use a bowl large enough to hold the dough and allow it to double in size. To make ciabatta with its characteristic large holes you need a fairly wet dough (about 80% hydrated), which is sticky and hard to handle. I leave it in the mixing bowl, stretching and folding it with a soft plastic scraper. You can use wet hands if you prefer.

Total rise time can be 4 – 6 hours, depending on the room temperature. The trick is trying to judge when it has risen enough to get a good 'bounce' in the oven. Leave it too long and you will end up with a fairly flat loaf. Getting it right takes a bit of practice.

Making starter from scratch

Day 1: Mix 1 teaspoon flour and 1 teaspoon water in a small clear jar. Seal and let stand overnight.

Days 2, 3, 4 and 5: Add 1 teaspoon flour and 1 teaspoon water to the jar and mix. After a few days bubbles should start to appear. If unhappy with the bubbles, keep going for a few more days.

In a larger, lidded jar, say 300 – 400 mL, take about 15g of the mixture above, add 100g water, and mix thoroughly. Then mix in 100g flour. Cover and let ferment. This is your starter and you can keep it in the fridge once it has fermented.

The starter will keep in the fridge for several weeks. It will keep longer but will need to be fed before use. Feed your starter by pouring about half away and feed with equal weights of water and flour (about 30 – 50g of each). Don't worry too much about lumps – they will disappear.

Making the sponge

Make the sponge by taking about a tablespoon of starter from the jar and add equal weights of water and flour. Eg to make 220g sponge:

1. Add 1 or 2 tablespoons starter to a bowl (the quantity is not critical).
2. Add 110g water, stir thoroughly
3. Add 110g flour, mix reasonably thoroughly. Don't worry about a few lumps.
4. Cover with a clean shower cap (available from Aldi as re-usable food covers) and let stand on bench overnight.
5. Replenish (feed) your starter.

Ingredients

This recipe makes 2 loaves. Halve the amounts for 1 loaf.

- 440g sponge (or baker's starter), 100 per cent hydration
- 530g lukewarm water
- 700g baker's flour (or 90g rye flour and 610g baker's flour, mixed in a separate bowl)
- 2 teaspoons salt

Method

1. Add the water to a large bowl, leaving room for the mixture to double in size.
2. Add the sponge and whisk thoroughly.
3. Add the salt and stir.
4. Add the flour and combine to form a sticky ball. Again, don't worry about lumps, they will vanish. Cover and leave for an hour. The dough should now be nice and smooth inside.
5. In the bowl use a soft plastic bowl scraper to stretch and fold by pulling one edge of the dough away from you and folding it back on itself; rotate $\frac{1}{4}$ turn and repeat through several full turns. Cover and leave for 10 minutes.
6. Repeat stretch and fold three more times at 10-minute intervals. This creates structure in the dough without kneading. If pressed for time, skip this step and spend more time on step 5.
7. Cover and leave to rise for 3 to 5 hours depending on ambient temperature. The dough can be left overnight or longer in the fridge like this. It will slowly rise in the fridge.
8. When ready to bake, pre-heat oven to 240°C.
9. Gently pour the dough out (to prevent gas escaping) onto a heavily floured surface, and dust with more flour. Cut dough into ciabatta-sized pieces and shape quickly with a dough scraper. Don't use any pressure to avoid losing the rise.
10. Gently roll the loaves onto a floured sheet of baking paper then slide on to a baking tray. Re-form into ciabatta shapes.
11. Place a flat metal dish with a cup of hot water in the bottom of the oven to create steam.
12. Bake at 240°C for 20 minutes, then inspect the loaves, turning if necessary. Bake for a further 10 minutes or until brown.

Tips

1. Sourdough is a fairly slow process and an hour or so here and there doesn't matter much. In winter I often let it rise in the oven (~ 30°C), just to speed things up a bit.
2. You need to start the process about 24 hours before you want to eat the bread. If you leave it too late, a pinch or two of dried yeast in the final mix will speed things along considerably – but it won't taste as good.
3. If the starter is left in the fridge for some months, it will get a grey watery sludge on it. Pour the sludge and most of the starter down the sink, then feed it daily for a few days. It should come good.
4. Keep a rescue kit – scoop out a tablespoon of good fresh starter and spread a thin layer on a sheet of baking paper. Place it in a cool oven to dry. When dry, peel off the dried starter and pulverise it in a mortar and pestle, and store the powder in a zip-lock bag in the freezer. To replenish: mix a teaspoon of the powder in a small jar with two teaspoons of water and one of flour. Let it stand overnight, and when you see bubbles forming, transfer it to a bigger jar and feed it.
5. Experiment!