

A STEADING CODEX FIELD GUIDE

A Sourdough Starter, Week by Week

Flour, water, time — from a jar of paste to a living leaven.

A sourdough starter is the easiest ferment to begin and the easiest to give up on in week one, because it always stalls right when it looks promising. Here's what's actually happening, week by week, so you hold your nerve — and the log that tells you when it's truly ready.

SC The Steading Codex

The beginning

Equal flour and water, a warm spot, and patience.

In a clean jar, mix **equal weights of flour and water** — say 50 g each — to a thick paste. Whole-grain or rye flour to start gives the wild yeast and bacteria more to work with. Cover loosely (it needs to breathe, not seal) and leave it somewhere warm, around 75°F.

For the first couple of days feed it once a day: discard about half, then stir in fresh equal weights of flour and water. You may see early bubbles and smell something sharp — that's the wrong microbes having a brief party. Keep going.

Use unchlorinated water if you can — a jug left out overnight is fine — and keep everything clean but not sterile. You want the good wild cultures, not none.

The false start

It looked alive, then it died. This is normal. Feed it.

Around day 3 or 4, a new grower's starter usually goes flat and smells oddly of nothing much, or faintly of feet. Almost everyone quits here. Don't. The first bloom of bubbles was the wrong bacteria; now the yeast and the sour lactic bacteria you actually want are slowly taking over.

Keep the daily rhythm: discard half, feed equal flour and water, warm spot. By the end of the week you should start to see real, consistent bubbling a few hours after each feed, and the smell should turn pleasantly sour and yeasty — like tangy bread, not like decay.

Finding its rhythm

Feeding on schedule, and the test that says 'ready'.

Now feed **twice a day** at roughly even intervals, and watch the jar. A maturing starter will **rise and roughly double**, then fall — and the time it takes to peak is your clock. Mark the jar with a rubber band at feed height and see how long it takes to reach the top.

The readiness check is the **float test**: drop a spoonful into water. If it floats, it's full of gas and strong enough to raise a loaf. When it doubles predictably in 4–6 hours at ~75°F and passes the float test, you have a working starter — usually somewhere in week two.

Daily counter, or the fridge

Feed it to your schedule, not the other way around.

Baking often? Keep it on the counter and feed once or twice a day. Baking weekly? Keep it in the fridge and feed once a week — cold slows it right down. To bake from a fridge starter, take it out, feed it a day ahead, and let it wake up and peak before you use it.

You don't need a giant jar of it. A small, well-fed starter is stronger than a big neglected one, and 'discard' isn't waste — it's the base for pancakes, crackers, and flatbreads.

Levain to bake

The shape of a loaf — the timings are yours to dial in.

The rhythm of a basic loaf: build a **levain** from a little ripe starter the night before; mix it with flour and water and rest (autolyse); add salt and do a **bulk ferment** with a few gentle folds over some hours until the dough is puffy and alive; **shape**, and give it a long, slow, cold proof in the fridge overnight; then bake hot, covered — a preheated Dutch oven traps the steam that gives you a real crust.

This is the shape of the process, not a tested recipe — hydration, times, and temperature are what you'll log and refine loaf by loaf. Start from a recipe you trust, then make it yours.

When it sulks

Almost everything is temperature, feeding, or patience.

Won't rise / sluggish — too cold, underfed, or just young; warm it, feed on schedule, give it days. **A layer of grey liquid on top (hooch)** — it's hungry; pour it off and feed more often. **Too sour** — feed more frequently and keep it warmer, or use it younger.

The one hard stop: **fuzzy or coloured mould** — pink, orange, green, black, anything fuzzy and raised on the surface — means throw it out and start again. A healthy starter smells sour and clean and never grows fuzz.

Starter & bake log

Feed, rise time, and how the loaf turned out.

DATE	FEED RATIO	TIME TO PEAK / FLOAT?	BAKED?	CRUST / CRUMB / NOTES

YOU'VE GOT THE GUIDE

Now keep the record. The full ledger is *The Culture Archive*.

The log at the back is one sheet from The Culture Archive — a 100+ page working field journal for the whole season, not just this guide: structured logs, reference decks, and season reviews. If this helped, that's where the rest of it lives.

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