



How we eat now

The rise of sourdough

Inspired by east London bakers, **Emma Freud** gets to grips with the most complicated loaf on earth

@emmalfreud

Sourdough is having a huge moment, and if you can get beyond the slightly annoying hipster association, it's easy to see why. It has a total of three ingredients, and the rise comes from the simple act of flour and water fermenting together to create its own natural yeast and bacteria. But, more importantly, it's a massive act of love: to get the flour and water to the right stage of fermenting takes 10 days of 'feeding' a flour and water paste with more flour and water. This eventually creates the mother – a bubbling pot that lives in your fridge and as long as you feed it (her?) regularly, you can scoop bits off to make sourdough bread for the rest of time. Last month, I undertook a sourdough course at the E5 bakery in Hackney, where their mother was begun over 100 years ago. And I'm not even making that up.

Having spent eight hours learning the science, this week I set about baking it on my own and would like to talk you through the process – not so that you can copy my fairly lame lead, but so that you truly know what has gone into the ancient recipe for this spectacular, smoky, tangy, complex, king and queen of breads.

MONDAY

9am STEP 1 FOUR ENTIRE DAYS before I fancy a piece of toast, I mix the egg cup full of mother which the bakery gave me with precise quantities of water and flour, then leave the dough to ferment for six hours. This is SIMPLE – don't know what the big fuss is about.

4pm STEP 2 I mix the dough with more water and more flour thereby turning it into a leaven which I will leave in the fridge for two days. I try to set the timer on my phone for 'two days' but it doesn't understand the question.

TUESDAY

Day off Phew.

WEDNESDAY

4pm STEP 3 The leaven is released from the fridge. I mix it with more water and more flour, give it a bit of a knocking, then lay it back in its bowl.

4.30pm STEP 4 I add salt, mix again, and go to pick up my child from school.

5pm STEP 5 Child gets into the car and finds me 'stretching and folding' the sourdough. This needs to be done at regular intervals for seemingly the rest of time. Child looks horrified. 'What is that?' he says, only with worse language. 'It's bread' I say. 'Oh good' he says, 'I'm starving'. 'It won't be ready til tomorrow,' I confess. 'What about the bread you were making

on Monday – can I have some of that?' 'That's still this, so no.' 'I don't understand,' says the child. 'Neither do I,' say I.

5.45pm STEP 6 Home. Time to stretch and fold again. Getting marginally better at this bit.

6.30pm STEP 7 Back in the kitchen. Stretch and fold number three – not much else to report.

7.15pm STEP 8 Going out, so sourdough will have to enjoy its first outing to the cinema. As we get to the traffic lights, I stretch, fold, and hope we aren't pulled over by the police.

8pm STEP 9 As the movie previews start, I quickly stretch and fold number four. Hadn't noticed til now the interesting, fermenty, appley smell that comes from the dough. I think everyone else in the cinema may have noticed it too.

8.45pm STEP 10 Hadn't thought through the length of the film so have to leave cinema early in order to get home for the crucial 'shape the dough into a round and place in a floured bread basket' stage. Bread basket goes into the fridge and I am breathless with excitement. Only 19 hours to go.

THURSDAY

2pm STEP 11 The risen dough is slashed with a knife to allow steam to do something (I forgot to listen to that bit), and goes into a pre-heated iron casserole dish, lid on, bread into oven. We're nearing the end of the 78-hour process and I can smell success, or at least, something resembling bread.

2.30pm STEP 12 Lid comes off so the top can brown. The excitement is palpable.

2.45pm STEP 13 Bread is removed from oven and released onto a wire rack. It's done, it's over and it is magnificent. The boyfriend shows me the sourdough loaf he had bought from our local baker that morning for £2.50 just in case my one didn't work out. It took him 8 minutes to buy including the walk there and back. Mine has taken four days. To be honest, his is nicer, but mine has been a bigger adventure.

Moral of the story: I will never, ever, ever make sourdough again. But I will never, ever, ever buy a sourdough loaf again without going down on my knees and congratulating the bakers for their devotion, effort, feeding, fermenting, stretching, folding, care and love. How incredible that there are people in the UK prepared to go through this astonishing, time-honoured process to bring us our daily toast. I salute them.



Good Food contributing editor Emma Freud is a journalist and broadcaster, director of Red Nose Day and a co-presenter of Radio Four's *Loose Ends*.

The simplest loaf in Britain (not sourdough)

This isn't sourdough, it's soda bread, and is so simple because it needs no kneading or proving. It's yeast-free because the bicarbonate of soda reacts with the buttermilk to make the bread rise. It's so quick that it takes literally five minutes from having the idea to putting it in the oven. And it's seriously delicious – especially with smoked salmon, gravadlax or goat's cheese.

CUTS INTO 10 slices **PREP** 5 mins
COOK 40 mins **EASY** V

500g wholemeal flour
2 tsp sea salt
1 tsp bicarbonate of soda
1 tbsp finely chopped rosemary
(optional)
400ml whole milk
1 lemon, juiced
2 tsp honey

1 Heat oven to 200C/180C fan/gas 6. Mix together the flour, salt and bicarb in a bowl. And if you'd like rosemary bread, add the chopped rosemary too.
2 Mix together the milk and lemon juice in a jug, and wait for a minute as it magically turns into buttermilk. Then stir in the honey, and simply pour it into the flour mixture. Stir it with a knife for a minute until the whole thing comes together into a sticky dough.

3 Tip onto a floured work surface and shape it into a ball.

4 Put the ball on a floured baking tray and, using a sharp knife, make a deep cross on top.

5 Put in the oven and bake for 40 mins.

6 Cool on a wire rack until warm, then slice and serve. And that's literally it.

The plain loaf is fantastic with smoked salmon and a dill, mustard and honey sauce made from mixing together a tablespoon each of Dijon mustard and oil, a teaspoon each of honey and vinegar, some salt, pepper and a handful of chopped dill. And if you make the rosemary loaf, it's particularly gorgeous spread with fig chutney and goat's cheese.

GOOD TO KNOW low fat

PER SLICE 207 kcals • fat 2g • saturates 1g • carbs 36g • sugars 4g • fibre 5g • protein 7g • salt 1.3g

