

Slow-Rising Breads

Start with a yeast sponge to make chewy, delicious loaves

BY AMY SCHERBER



I'm a bread baker and I'm proud of that title. I enjoy getting my hands in the dough and shaping it into loaves. My greatest pleasure, however, comes from baking a beautiful loaf of bread for someone else to touch, taste, and enjoy. Sometimes I watch customers as they approach the counter: their eyes light up when they see the array of golden-brown breads and smell the sweet aromas of our offerings. While many factors come together to make great bread—tasty flour, careful handling, and a good oven to name a few—one of the most critical factors is time. If you want a loaf that is moist and chewy and has a complex flavor, you just can't hurry it along.

I find the sponge method of making bread a good compromise between the quicker straight-dough method, which produces yeasty-flavored loaves, and the more involved sourdough process. I begin by mixing flour, water, and a little bit of yeast to make a sponge; I let the sponge ferment for about eight hours, and then I mix it with more flour and other ingredients to make bread dough. In addition to letting the yeast and flour ferment in the sponge, I give the dough a long, slow fermentation, too. Not only does this produce a moister crumb, but it also allows the flavor of the yeast to dissipate so the taste of toasty wheat and other ingredients comes forward.

While this may sound like a lot of time to make one batch of bread, the actual work is only slightly more than when making a straight-dough bread. Three of my favorite breads to make with a sponge starter and slow fermentation are chewy Walnut Honey Bread, crusty Whole-Wheat Cinnamon Rolls, and a loose-textured Italian Bread (see recipes on pp. 52–53). You can

Great bread takes time. Like sourdough bread, bread leavened with a sponge and allowed to ferment slowly will have a moist, chewy crumb and a crisp crust.

Photo: Ellen Silverman



Yeast thrives in a goopy flour and water mixture. Vigorously stir the sponge with your fingers to introduce air.

experiment with your own recipes too. The rule of thumb for a recipe that calls for one pound of flour is to use half the yeast, add 1½ cups of sponge, and decrease the water by a tablespoon.

A FLAVORFUL SPONGE FROM YEAST, FLOUR, AND WATER

A sponge starter, also known as a *poolish* in France and a *biga* in Italy, is made with yeast, flour, and water (see recipe on p. 52). In the bakery, I use fresh cake yeast because I like its mild flavor, but active dry yeast works fine and is more widely available. The yeast multiplies while the sponge ferments, so you don't need to put in as much yeast as you would if you were making a straight-dough bread.

I recommend using unbleached white bread flour in the sponge rather than whole-wheat or rye flour because the sponge should be elastic and bubbly in order to lift the bread dough. White bread flour is high in gluten and produces this elasticity.

The last ingredient is water. Breads around the world get much of their unique character from the local water. If you prefer not to drink the tap water in your area, you should use bottled water in your bread as well.

Temperature is important when mixing the sponge. You want to dissolve the yeast in the water that is between 105° and 115°F. Water that's hotter than this will kill the yeast, and cooler water won't get the yeast going. For foolproof results, take the temperature of the water with an instant-read thermometer just before adding the yeast. Stir the yeast into the water and let it stand for five minutes. The water will turn cloudy and the yeast creamy, but it probably won't be bubbly. Some people recommend putting in a ¼ teaspoon sugar to kick-start the yeast. I don't like to use sugar in my breads or to get the yeast working too quickly, so I don't add sugar. If you want to see signs that the yeast is alive and active, stir in ½ teaspoon flour and wait ten to fifteen minutes. The yeast should start to bubble; if it doesn't, start again with new yeast.

Once the yeast is dissolved, mix it with the remaining water into the flour. Stir with a wooden spoon or your fingers until you have a stretchy, sticky sponge dough, about 100 strokes (see photo at left).

SPONGES RIPEN AT ROOM TEMPERATURE

After mixing, I transfer the sponge to an upright plastic container, which I cover loosely with plastic wrap so the sponge can breathe. I mark the level of the sponge and the time that I mixed it right on the container. This way, I can monitor its progress as it rises and ferments.

The sponge needs to sit and ripen at room temperature for about eight hours. You'll know that it's fully ripe and ready to use when it has risen up the sides of the container to about three times its original height and has begun to fall in the center (see photo at right). The ideal ripening temperature for the sponge is 75°. If the room is colder, the sponge will take longer to ripen. If the room is warmer, it will ferment faster. If you can't use the sponge within three hours of when it has fully ripened, cover it tightly and put it in the refrigerator. Before you use it, let it stand at room temperature for at least an hour.

Since you'll only need 1 to 1½ cups of sponge for each batch of bread, you'll have enough sponge for several batches of dough. After about three days, the sponge will become excessively tangy and lose its

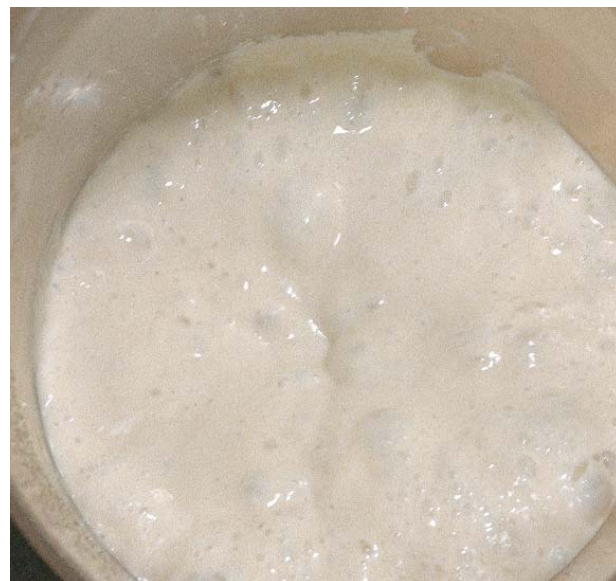
leavening ability, but don't throw it out. Keep any leftover sponge in the refrigerator (up to ten to twelve days) and add one cup of it to your next batch of sponge for a tangier, more complex flavor.

SPONGE FOR FLAVOR, MORE YEAST FOR A PREDICTABLE RISE

Although the sponge has a potent supply of yeast, I recommend adding a bit more yeast to the bread dough. It gives the sponge a boost and makes the dough rise more predictably, which is better for my schedule. If you don't want to add extra yeast, be sure to catch the sponge when it's fully ripe—when it has risen to three times its original height and has started to drop in the center.

Once the dough is mixed, shape it into a ball, put it in a plastic container or a lightly oiled bowl, and cover it tightly. Let the dough rise for about an hour at room temperature for the flavor to begin to develop, and then refrigerate the dough overnight (or for at least eight hours) to continue developing. The dough will keep in the refrigerator up to two days before it gets too sluggish. It's possible to skip this long fermentation, but if you shape and bake the bread after a short rise, you'll taste more yeast, the crumb won't be as chewy, and the bread won't be as moist.

The next day, let the dough sit at room



Bubbly sponge is full of yeast but doesn't have a yeasty flavor. After fermenting for eight hours, the sponge starts to drop in the middle, signaling that it's ripe and ready to be mixed into bread dough.



See-through plastic containers are handy for keeping track of slow-rising bread. The author marks the time the sponge was mixed and its original height before leaving it to rise.



Add chunky ingredients by kneading, not stirring. Currants and sesame seeds are sprinkled on the Whole-Wheat Currant Roll dough and then incorporated by folding the dough like a letter. More kneading distributes them evenly throughout the dough.

temperature until it begins to rise again, about an hour to an hour and a half. Then shape the loaves, let them rise, and bake them as you would any other bread.

SPONGE

This sponge makes enough for two to three batches of bread, and it can easily be halved. *Yields about 4 cups.*

*½ tsp. active dry yeast (or 1 tsp. fresh yeast)
½ cup warm water (105° to 115°F)
1½ cups room-temperature water
1 lb. (3½ cups) unbleached bread flour (or all-purpose)*

Stir the yeast into the warm water to dissolve; let the mixture stand for 5 min. to activate the yeast. Measure the flour into a bowl. When the yeast mixture is ready, mix it and the room-temperature water into the flour. Stir with a wooden spoon or your fingers until you have a stretchy, sticky sponge, about 100 strokes.

Transfer the sponge to an upright plastic container and loosely cover with plastic wrap. Mark the level of the sponge and the time.

Let the sponge rise at room temperature for about 8 hours. It will be fully ripe and ready to use when it has risen up the sides of the bowl to about 3 times its original height and has begun to drop in the center. If you won't use the sponge within 3 hours, put it in the refrigerator. It will keep for 3 days. Before using it, let it stand at room temperature for at least an hour.

WALNUT HONEY BREAD

The walnuts naturally make the dough turn a beautiful subtle purple color, and the addition of walnut oil gives an even richer flavor to the bread. *Yields 2 loaves.*

*½ tsp. active dry yeast (or 1 tsp. fresh yeast)
½ cup warm water (105° to 115°)
½ cup room-temperature water
3 Tbs. honey
4½ tsp. walnut oil (or olive oil)
1 cup sponge (see recipe at left)
1 lb. (3½ cups) unbleached bread flour (or all-purpose flour)
1 Tbs. kosher salt
1½ cups walnut pieces, toasted
2 Tbs. flour for decoration*

Stir the yeast into the warm water to dissolve; let the mixture stand for 5 min.

Put the room-temperature water, honey, walnut oil, and the sponge in a bowl with the yeast mixture. Break up the sponge with your fingers and mix it for 2 to 3 min. until foam develops. Add the flour and salt. Lift the moist ingredients over the dry, turning the dough in the bowl until the liquid is incorporated and the dough forms a thick mass. Knead for about 1 min. in the bowl and then move the dough to a lightly floured surface. Knead for 5 min. by folding the dough in half, pushing down on it with the palms of your hands, and then lifting it and giving it a quarter turn. Use just enough flour on the counter to keep the dough from sticking. The dough will still be a little lumpy. Cover the dough and let it relax for 15 min.

Pat the dough until it's flat and then sprinkle the walnuts on top. Fold the top third of dough towards you and the bottom third away from you, as if you were folding a letter. Give the dough a quarter turn and repeat the folds. Knead the dough for 2 min. Don't worry if the walnuts stick out—they'll be easier to work in once the dough has risen. Shape the dough into a ball and put it in a plastic container or a lightly oiled bowl. Cover tightly, let it rise for about an hour at room temperature, and then put it in the refrigerator for 8 to 12 hours.

Remove the dough from the refrigerator and let it sit, covered, for 1 to 1½ hours.

Briefly knead to work the walnuts into the



A sponge creates a moist, airy texture, and walnuts give the bread a warm hue.

dough. Divide the dough in half. Flatten one piece slightly, and then fold and push the outside edges of the dough into the center to make a round ball. Dust the flour off part of the work surface and set the ball on it, seam side down. To seal the seams, cup the ball with your hands and move it in a small circle against the work surface. Repeat with the other piece of dough.

If you're using a baking stone in your oven, put the loaves seam side down and 3 in. apart on a baker's peel that has been sprinkled with cornmeal. Otherwise, put the loaves on a baking sheet that has been lined with kitchen parchment or sprinkled with cornmeal. Cover the loaves lightly with plastic film that has been crumpled first to keep it from sticking to the dough. Let the loaves rise for 1½ to 2 hours in a draft-free place until doubled in volume. The loaves will be fully risen when they feel light and airy when lifted slightly from underneath, and when a fingerprint pushed gently into the side of the loaf doesn't spring back.

Heat the oven to 425°. If you're using a baking stone, heat it in the oven for half an hour.

Just before baking, spoon 1 Tbs. flour onto the middle of each loaf for decoration. With a razor blade, gently slash an "x" on the tops of the loaves to allow a place for the air to escape and the loaves to expand. Put the baking sheet in the oven or slide the loaves from a peel onto the stone using a smooth, quick motion. Quickly spray the loaves and the oven 4 to

5 times with water from a spray bottle. Mist again in 2 min. Bake for 30 to 35 min., until the loaves are golden brown and sound hollow when tapped on the bottom.

WHOLE-WHEAT CURRANT ROLLS

This dough has a beautifully smooth texture and becomes firmer about half an hour after mixing, when the currants absorb moisture from the dough. The rolls are slightly sweet and the sesame seeds make them crunchy. *Yields 20 rolls.*

¾ tsp. dry yeast (or 1½ tsp. fresh yeast)
½ cup warm (105° to 115°) water
¼ cup room-temperature water
1½ cups sponge (see recipe at left)
11 oz. (2½ cups) unbleached bread flour
(or all-purpose)
7 oz. (1½ cups) whole-wheat flour
1 Tbs. plus 2 tsp. kosher salt
½ cup sesame seeds
1 cup currants

Mix and knead the dough following the instructions for Walnut Honey Bread, adding the sesame seeds and currants in place of the walnuts. The dough will be sticky, but don't use much flour when kneading or the bread will be dry. Use a pastry scraper to lift and turn the dough.

After the dough has risen in the refrigerator and has come back to room temperature, divide the dough into 20 equal pieces. Shape each piece into a round ball on a lightly floured work surface. Put the rolls at least 1½ inches apart on a greased or parchment-lined baking sheet. Let the rolls rise in a draft-free place until doubled in size; this should take between 1½ and 3 hours.

Heat the oven to 425°. Put the rolls in, quickly spray the rolls and the oven 4 to 5 times with water from a spray bottle. Mist again in 2 min. Bake for 30 to 35 min., until the rolls are golden brown and sound hollow when tapped on the bottom.

ITALIAN BREAD

This wet, sticky dough makes loaves that are airy and crunchy. Right before baking, tug on the risen loaves to stretch them out. *Yields 2 loaves.*

¾ tsp. active dry yeast or (1½ tsp. fresh yeast)
½ cup warm (105° to 115°) water
¾ cup room-temperature water
1½ cups sponge (see recipe at left)
17 oz. (3¾ cups) unbleached bread flour
(or all-purpose)
1 Tbs. plus 1 tsp. kosher salt

Stir the yeast into the warm water to dissolve; let the mixture stand for 5 min. Mix the yeast mixture, the room-temperature water, and the sponge with a paddle in a stationary mixer on low speed until foamy. Then switch to a dough hook and add the flour and salt. Knead the dough on medium speed for 5 min. It will be elastic but rough-looking. Let it rest for 15 min. and then knead on medium speed for 1 to

Sponge breads are good keepers. The Italian bread (top), Walnut Honey Bread (middle), and Whole-Wheat Currant Rolls (bottom) will stay fresh for days.

2 min., until the dough leaves the sides of the bowl cleanly. It will still be quite wet and sticky.

Scrape the dough into a plastic container or a lightly oiled bowl. Cover tightly, let it rise for about an hour at room temperature, and then refrigerate it for at least 8 hours.

Remove the dough from the refrigerator and let it sit, covered, for 1 to 1½ hours.

Heat the oven to 450°. The dough will be very soft and sticky, so work on a well-floured surface. Divide the dough in half. Flatten one piece, gently pressing out some of the air bubbles. Fold the top third of dough toward you and the bottom third away from you, as if you were folding a letter. Use a pastry scraper to loosen the dough from the work surface. Press it flat, give it a quarter turn. Starting with the short end near you, roll it into a cylinder,

pressing the seams shut tightly. Put the loaf, seam side down, on a baking sheet that has been very generously sprinkled with cornmeal. Repeat with the other piece of dough.

Cover the loaves with crumpled plastic wrap and let them rise for about an hour. Just before baking, stretch each loaf to the full length of the baking sheet. Put the loaves in the oven, quickly spray them and the oven 4 to 5 times with water from a spray bottle. Mist again in 2 min. Bake about 30 min., until they sound hollow when you tap them with your fingers.

Amy Scherber makes crunchy loaves leavened by both sponges and sourdoughs at her bakery, Amy's Bread, in New York City. ♦

