

Sourdough Terms Glossary

Activation: Activating your starter so it is ready to use. Making a levain is activation.

Autolyse: This is a step sometimes called for in recipes in which the flour and water are mixed just until combined and allowed to rest before adding salt, leavening, or further ingredients. The autolyse step provides several benefits through the hydration of the flour and the enzyme activity that follows. It helps break down the gluten and turn starches into sugars to feed the starter. But we are doing none of this in this course.

Bulk Ferment; This step is the first fermentation period of the dough after the initial mixing of flour, starter, and water and often comes after a period of kneading. The bulk fermentation generally takes place at room temperature, unless otherwise noted in the recipe and is a longer period of time (4 -24 hours) than the final proofing period.

Crumb; A term referring to the texture of the inside of a loaf of sourdough bread. Often based on the size of the holes produced by the carbon dioxide or the moisture (or lack thereof) in the loaf. This term is also used in regular bread making and sometimes baking.

Elasticity; The ability of a dough to hold its shape or return to its original shape after a fermentation period. Elasticity is dependent on the level of protein or gluten in the flour as well as the amount of fermentation that has occurred. Doughs can lose their elasticity if over-fermented. Also, low-protein flours do not produce as much elasticity as higher-protein flours.

Feeding; The process of adding flour and water to the sourdough starter to keep it active and healthy. This is usually done at least once per day, if the starter is kept at room temperature. For starters kept in the refrigerator, it only needs to happen once a week or less.

Hydration; The ratio of water to flour in a sourdough starter or bread dough. The hydration is calculated by dividing the total amount of water by the total amount of flour. Nothing to worry about unless you are getting really serious about sourdough baking. But that is not this course!

Kneading; The process of flour hydration and gluten development through movement. By stretching the dough upon itself, often on a lightly floured work surface, the gluten is activated and a smooth, elastic dough develops over a period of 5-15 minutes. You can achieve this in the Thermomix and my recipes will reflect this.

Leaven / Levain; A sourdough leavening agent made from a sourdough mother culture (or starter). This technique is often used to boost the yeast activity of the sourdough starter by feeding a small amount of starter a larger quantity of flour and water.

Pre-Ferment; Sometimes referred to as a sponge or poolish, a pre-ferment is a mixture of flour, water, and starter allowed to ferment before being mixed into the final dough. The subtle acid and yeast notes found in sourdough breads are what give it irresistible flavor but these are only possible after a period of fermentation. Pre-ferments are therefore often used to add flavor and depth to doughs which require a shorter bulk ferment or proofing period.

Proofing/Proving; This is the final rise of the bread before it sees the oven. It generally, but not always, happens after the final shaping of the loaf.

Scoring/Slashing; Cutting the outside of the dough with a very sharp razor or knife just before baking. This practice achieves two things. First, it can be used as a decorative element on breads, to create a signature look, or to create a design to help bakers of many loaves to tell one from the other. Most importantly, however, slashing is used to help a bread expand in the oven without exploding, cracking, or creating unsightly bulges. Slashing increases the loaf's ability to expand once it meets a hot oven.

Stretch-and-Fold or Pull and Fold; An alternative to traditional kneading used to develop gluten. This method is often used in high hydration doughs and is performed periodically throughout the bulk fermentation. The concept is to take a corner of the dough, fold it upon itself, rotate the dough, and repeat. Once all four corners of the dough have been stretched and folded, gluten development and a smooth, elastic dough are underway.