The Sourdough Experiment

By: Pyrotech

This is an experiment to see how fast, and how well the capture and cultivation of wild yeast for the purpose of baking "sourdough bread" works in my home. This topic came up during a discussion on last minute items to buy because of limited shelf life. Yeast was high the list.

This was when making yeast and sourdough was mentioned, and I decided to try my hand at sourdough. The basis for this experiment and the recipe I am using for the bread came from a site I found on the basics of sourdough baking by John Ross http://www.io.com/~sjohn/sour.htm I would recommend reading his site as well. Since this is only my observations from trying this myself. And not exactly a complete step by step guide.

The days are feeding days, roughly 24 hours apart.

Day 1.

A mix of 1c general purpose white flour, Wal-Mart brand. Was mixed with 1c of warm tap water and stirred with a wooden spoon. It was then placed into a wide mouth pint glass canning jar with no lid.

It was stirred with a wooden spoon in the morning after the first mix. And again before feeding.

Day 2

Poured of ½ the contents of jar, which are starting to get a few small bubbles and a faint yeast scent.

It was fed with 1/2 c flour and ½ c warm water and stirred into the starter with a wooden spoon

Day 3

Today the starter was a lot more active, lots of bubbles and frothing.

This time I added 1c flour and 1c warm water. This was done to give me more starter.

Day 4

Today there is a distinct sour smell coming from the starter. I think I actually have a good starter to work with. I ended up transferring the starter to larger jar.

My first try and baking bread did not turn out so well. It did not rise hardly at all, making it heavy and dense. But it did have a taste very much like sourdough English muffins.

I had used half of my starter for this failed batch of bread. So I added another cup of feed mix.

Day 5

I tried a second batch of bread today; this time I let the dough raise a lot longer. Then the previous attempt. This time I let the dough rise for nearly 24 hours, purely by accident. I had mixed up a batch and then had to run some errands, and didn't get back in time to bake it so I let sit until I came home from work the next afternoon.

This time when I baked the bread I took a spray bottle of water and misted the inside of the oven at the start of the baking.

The loaf fell a little bit, but it still turned out. I ended up with a nice golden brown loaf of sourdough bread. And yes it tasted very good, the texture and taste reminded me of sourdough English muffins.

I was a little surprised by how long it took for the dough to rise. It was a lot longer then I had expected. Perhaps, as the starter grows stronger with time this will shorten the time needed to rise.

Commercial yeast.

As a side note, I also want to add what I learned from a second experiment I did using store bought yeast.

During my search on sourdough bread and yeast, I noticed a couple of sites mention that if you used store bought yeast in your sourdough starter, you really growing the same strain of commercial yeast.

My search also came across the topic of drying sourdough. So what I did was bake a batch of starter and added 1 package commercial active dry yeast.

This batch became active with in a few hours. I then took a poured a layer of this batter into a shallow plate and let it air dry overnight.

After, air drying I used the back of a wooden spoon to crush the dried batter into a course powder.

I then proofed this "homemade yeast" and found that I had active yeast again.

The questions now are.

How long will the "homemade yeast" last after drying?

How long before the wild yeast cultivate and take over the commercial strain of yeast?

Can you Vacuum seal the yeast?

But I now know that I can bake bread without ever having to buy commercial yeast again. I can also see why baking bread was an all day task, and why the first commercial bakers would be welcome.