

Proofing Sourdough Guide

The First Proof:

What is the First Proof?

The first proof, also known as the **bulk fermentation stage**, is a crucial step in sourdough bread baking. It's the period where the yeast and bacteria in the starter ferment the dough, creating carbon dioxide, which causes the dough to rise. **A good way to remember this is that “bulk” means you haven't shaped or separated the dough and are letting it ferment in a big bulky mass.**

Steps for the First Proof:

Mix and Rest: After combining your flour, water, and sourdough starter, allow the dough to rest for 30 minutes before kneading. This initial rest helps with gluten development.

Bulk Fermentation: Let the dough undergo bulk fermentation. This usually takes 4-12 hours, depending on factors like room temperature, hydration level, and the amount of starter used.

Stretch and Fold: Incorporate techniques like the Stretch and Fold during the first proof every 30 minutes to an hour for the first few hours. This aids in gluten development, redistributes yeast, and enhances the overall structure. (See my Sourdough kneading guide).



The Second Proof:

What is the Second Proof?

The second proof comes after the dough has been divided and shaped into its final form. This step allows the shaped dough to relax and rise one last time before baking.

Steps for the Second Proof:

Shape the Dough: After the first proof, gently shape the dough into your desired form, such as a boule or batard. Place shaped dough in a banneton basket or a greased bowl and cover with a towel or plastic wrap.

Monitor the Rise: Keep an eye on the dough, looking for a noticeable increase in volume. The dough should be puffy and have a slight jiggle when gently shaken.

Finger Test: Perform the "**finger test**" by gently pressing your finger into the dough. If the indentation springs back slowly, it's ready for baking.



Common Problems During Proofing:

“My dough isn’t doubling in size.”

Most often this issue can be caused by either an issue with your starter or an issue with the environment. If your starter is not mature, active and bubbly, your dough will not rise well. If your house is very cool or the air is very dry you may experience issues during the proof stage also. I recommend a proofer for cooler months as this can increase yeast activity.

“My dough is super wet and sticky and doesn’t hold shape.”

This is almost always due to overproofing! Sourdough is a high-hydration dough so it is naturally more wet than a traditional bread dough. However, if your dough won’t hold shape and is sloppy wet, you’ve proofed too long! Cut back on proofing time to avoid the mess.

“My dough is sticking to my banneton basket and ruining the shape.”

Did you know you need to season your banneton basket?! I sure didn’t. If your banneton is new, lightly spray with water and place a TBS of rice flour inside. Shake the rice flour to coat the basket. Tap the basket to remove excess flour. Let it dry.



Even if your banneton is not new, it needs to have a light coating of rice flour to avoid sticking to the dough and ruining your shape.

In conclusion, mastering the first and second proofs are fundamental to achieving a delicious and well-textured sourdough bread. Whether using a proofer or banneton baskets, these steps contribute significantly to the overall quality of your homemade sourdough.

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