

Recipe for Man Bread

To make Man Bread you need to be prepared to do a bit of work and have some patience, both familiar to most men. The essential core to Man Bread is using two different levains, both of which are developed separately, and autolysation. There is no kneading, but some mixing and stretching is required preferably with a silicone spatula as this allows you to get under the dough at the bottom of the bowl. I always use glass bowls but a metal bowl will work just as well. For baking I use a Les Creuset pot.

Step one is developing the levains. This is going to take roughly 7-10 days and you will need to keep an eye on things on a daily basis. A levain is also known as a 'sourdough starter'. It is a culture of wild yeast in a dough. Always use organic flours to avoid being poisoned by additives.

Step two is cultivating a starter dough. This done by simply doubling your levain.

Step three is making the bread dough. This recipe will result in a fairly wet mix and it isn't suitable for kneading. Indeed, there is no need to knead. The dough can be stretched but it becomes sticky very quickly which limits stretching to around four to five stretches. Of course, you can keep flouring the board but then you are adding more flour to your dough.

It sounds like the process takes a long time but actually it is pretty straightforward and doesn't take much effort. The main time constraint is in being available to autolyse the starter and the dough. However, if you have a night in then there is plenty of time. I find from taking the levain out of the fridge to baking is around eight hours. The advantage is that if you get the timing right you have time for a few beers once you have made your bread dough.

Making the levains

Step one: making the levains

Gram Flour Levain

Ingredients

- A bag of organic Gram flour
- A bag of organic bread flour (white, brown, wholemeal, etc. Doesn't matter).
- Water

- Bowl
- Tea towel
- Plastic spatula

To start take a small amount of the gram flour, about ¼ of mug, and mix it with roughly equal quantity of warm water into a smooth paste. Put the paste into the bowl, autolyse/stir vigorously for a minute or so, and cover with the tea towel. Put somewhere warm and not in a draught (I put it on a top shelf).

Over the next 24 hours the levain should start to have some bubbles in it. This is where it is useful to use a glass bowl as you can see the bubbles. Once the bubbles have started to form fold it gently for about a minute with the spatula (autolyse). Then make a fresh mix of ¼ mug of flour and warm water and add to the to levain. Autolyse again. Cover. Leave for another 24 hours. Repeat.

Of course, the difficulty here is that the amount of levain starts to grow because you are continually adding more food (the flour and water mix). The answer to this is to remove about half the levain and throw it away before adding the next lot of fresh mix.

When the levain is 3-4 days old replace the gram flour feed with normal bread flour feed. This should introduce some renewed vigour. Use a normal bread flour feed about once every four feeds but otherwise keep up the gram flour feeding.

Let the levain develop for at least one week in this way to ensure you have a good strong culture. Once you are happy with the levain – it should start forming bubbles within an hour or so of feeding and roughly double in size every 24 hours (or less), then ‘fall back’ to normal size – you can put it in a jar, cover with cling film with holes punched in it, and keep in the fridge. You will still need to feed at around roughly once a week to once a month depending on how often you use it. As a rule I tend to put in as much feed as levain I use.

Bread Flour Levain

As above except make this levain purely with organic bread flour. Do not use any gram flour. You can mix and match the types of bread flour you use as long as they are organic. This levain tends to be more runny than the gram flour levain.

Once you have grown your levains it is a good idea to name them. My gram flour levain is C1 and my bread flour levain is C2.

Making Man Bread

Step two. Making the starter.

The great thing about the levains is they keep as long as you look after them properly and you can grow as much levain as you want or need.

To make the starter dough take roughly a ¼ of a mug of both C1 and C2 each and mix them together in a glass bowl. Remember to feed C1 and C2 to replace what you have taken.

To the levain mix add the same amount again of bread flour and warm water and fold in/autolyse for around one-to-two minutes (as long as it takes the kettle to boil). Cover with tea towel and put on top shelf. After 20 minutes or so fold/autolyse the starter again for as long as it takes the kettle to boil.

Repeat this another two times about one hour apart. That is folding/autolysing three-four times over the course of rough 2.5-3 hours.

Leave the starter overnight covered with the tea towel, or for as long as it takes to double in size – this can be as short as a couple of hours or as long as overnight. If the levains are treated well and autolysed well they are quite aggressive and will grow quickly. Now you are ready to make the bread.

Step three. Making the bread.

Ingredients

- Stater dough – around one mug full
- Warm water
- Strong Organic Bread Flour
- Glass bowl
- Plastic Spatula
- Anything you want to add to the bread: salt, seeds, honey, pepper, etc.

Ratios:

Starter dough should equal roughly $\frac{1}{4}$ of the total mix

- 3 parts warm water in 100s of millilitres (e.g. 300 mil of warm water)
- 5 equal parts strong organic bread flour in grams by volume or weight (e.g. 500g of flour by volume)

To start making the bread you should have around a mug full of starter. It will look like more than this in the bowl and it should be runny, sticky, and full of bubbles.

Next get your flour and warm water. The ratio is three measures of water to five measures of strong organic bread flour (300mil:500g, water:flour).

Pour the warm water into the glass bowl.

Add the starter dough. It should have lots of air bubbles and float on the water.

Stir the starter into the water with the spatula.

Add the flour.

Stir and fold the flour into the mix. The first autolyse of the bread mix.

Gently fold the mix around, up, and over, stretching it as you do so for around 1-2 minutes.

Cover with a tea towel and put on top shelf.

After 20 – 30 minutes stir and fold again with spatula. The second autolyse.

After around one hour stir and fold again. The third autolyse. This is optional and will depend on how the dough is rising. If the dough has already doubled in size I suggest going on to the final mix and stretch.

Leave to rise until it has doubled in size. If your starter is well made this should happen in a couple of hours but it can take longer depending on temperature, the type of flour used, and so on.

Once the dough has doubled in size flour a bread board or mixing surface generously using the strong organic bread flour. Get your baking tin, rub a thin coat of olive oil all over the inside then coat with a thin layer of flour (proper corn flour is good for this – not the cornflour used as a thickening agent). This will stop the bread sticking to the baking tin/pot. You can just coat with olive oil, or use butter, or dripping, or lard, and so on which will add subtle flavours to the bread. But use sparingly.

Using the spatula gently fold any additions – salt, spices, sun dried tomatoes, sultanas, cranberries, nuts, seeds, etc – into the dough. Scoop the dough onto the floured surface. Make sure you scrape all the dough out of the bowl in one. The dough should be sticky and will look far too runny to knead. That's good because Man Bread doesn't need kneading.

Gently roll the dough once to coat it in flour so it doesn't stick to everything.

Pull the edge of the dough out from the centre and fold it back into the centre. Do this on each 'side' so that you have pulled the dough fully from four opposite directions and folded each pull back into the centre. This stretches the dough out and pulls the gluten. You can get imaginative with this stretching. Be careful as the dough absorbs the flour quickly and becomes sticky and unworkable. Turn the dough over and put it into the baking pot with the 'seam side' down (the side you folded the pulls into).

Cover and leave to prove on top shelf for a couple of hours or for as long as it takes to get a decent rise. The dough will have proved when it has grown in size and looks 'liquidy' again. It may not have doubled in size but it should have grown substantially. I usually wait until it has grown by at least two thirds again.

Meantime set the oven at 190°C.

When the dough has grown to size put a little water into a baking tray and put in the bottom of the oven. Put the dough, in the baking tin/pot onto the middle shelf.

Bake for around one hour.

For the last five minutes of the bake turn the oven off and crack the door open.

After an hour take the bread out. Using a palette knife ease it away from the edges of the baking tin. It should be loose anyway but this helps release any sticky spots. Turn the loaf out and put on a wire rack to cool.

Glossary

Levain. A levain, or ‘starter dough’, is a mix of flour and water in which naturally occurring yeast has been cultured. A levain will live indefinitely as long as it is fed and not invaded by mold. It can be kept in the fridge in which case it will go dormant, but still needs to be fed around once every two weeks to once a month. A portion of the levain is used to cultivate a ‘starter dough’ which is then used to make the bread. Obviously when you take a portion of levain out you need to replace it with an equal amount of feed (flour and water mix). I have found that a good levain can be used and fed 3-4 times a week even when kept in the fridge.

Autolyse. Autolysing is the process of allowing, in this case, the flour to soak in the liquid so that the flour absorbs the liquid. In simple terms. What you are trying to do, actually, is to get everything working together and to get the yeast activating and mix the flour and liquid well so that it rises into a nice, tasty, bread (or pizza). In this method I autolyse the starter dough and the bread dough with good effect. Autolysing also has subtle effects on the taste of the bread and can bring out flavours.

When autolysing a use a plastic spatula and scrape around the edges of the mixing bowl and fold the dough back in. I make sure I scrape under the dough as well to lift it off the bottom of the bowl. I tend to lift the spatula as well pulling the dough upwards as this stretches the dough and activates the gluten. I autolyse about twice a day when making a levain and about 3-4 times when growing the starter dough. The bread mix I autolyse around 2-3 times but I don’t autolyse once I have stretched it and put it into the baking tin/pot.

I recommend against using machines to autolyse unless you are baking commercially as you are going to batter the hell out of the mixes.

I find that the time it takes for the kettle to boil is about right for an autolyse mixing and the time between autolyse mixings is long enough to relax with a beer.