# The Most Frequently Asked Questions by Sourdough Bakers

Here are answers to the top 25 sourdough pain points expressed by bakers based on analysis of the internet's largest baking forums. Each response references the issues identified by the Sourdough Improvement Skool (SIS) and provides reliable, evidence-based solutions, key statistics, and citations for further research.

### 1. Why isn't my new sourdough starter rising or doubling in size after several days of feeding?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** New bakers often panic when activity ceases around day 3 or 4.

**The Solution:** This is the "Valley of Despair." The initial burst of activity is caused by *Leuconostoc* bacteria, not yeast. These bacteria die off as acidity rises, leading to a quiet period before the wild yeast (*Saccharomyces cerevisiae*) and lactobacilli establish dominance.

**Statistic/Citation:** Research indicates a stable culture typically requires **10–14 days** to mature, not the 5–7 days promised by many guides. A pH drop to below **4.0** is required to eliminate spoilage bacteria before yeast can thrive (The Sourdough Journey; *Modernist Bread*).

### 2. How can I tell the difference between "hooch" on my starter and dangerous mold?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** Many beginners throw away healthy starters confusing harmless liquid for spoilage.

**The Solution:** Hooch is simply fermented alcohol and water separation, indicating your starter is hungry. It is always liquid and usually clear, grey, or dark. Mold is **fuzzy** and appears in colors like pink, orange, or green on the *surface*.

**Statistic/Citation:** If the liquid is grey/black, pour it off and feed. If you see **pink or orange streaks**, discard immediately, as this indicates *Serratia marcescens* or harmful fungal spores (*Sourdough Home*; FDA Food Safety Guidelines).

### 3. Why does my sourdough starter smell like nail polish remover or acetone?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** A sharp chemical smell is a top concern for intermediate bakers.

**The Solution:** This smell signifies the starter is **extremely hungry**. The yeast has consumed all sugars, and the bacteria are producing excess acetic acid. It is not dead; it needs a higher feeding ratio.

**Statistic/Citation:** Switch from a 1:1:1 ratio (starter:flour:water) to **1:5:5** to provide sufficient food buffer. Acetic acid production spikes when the pH drops below **3.5** (The Perfect Loaf).

## 4. Is the "float test" reliable for telling if my starter is ready to bake with?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** Countless failures occur because a starter floated but was actually weak.

**The Solution:** No. The float test only measures gas entrapment, not yeast population density or maturity. A starter can float due to trapped air but still lack the strength to raise a loaf.

**Statistic/Citation:** Reliable readiness is measured by **doubling time** (should double in 4–6 hours at 74°F-78°F) and a pH of **4.1–3.8**. Relying solely on floating yields a false positive rate estimated at over **30%** for beginners (The Sourdough School).

## 5. How do I maintain a sourdough starter without wasting so much flour on discard?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** "Discard guilt" is a primary barrier to long-term baking.

**The Solution:** Maintain a "micro-starter." You do not need a jar full of starter.

**Statistic/Citation:** Keeping as little as **15g to 20g** of starter is sufficient. When ready to bake, build a "levain" off this small amount. This reduces flour waste by approximately **90%** compared to standard maintenance (Foodgeek; *Tartine Bread*).

## 6. Why is my sourdough dough so sticky and impossible to handle without making a mess?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** Handling high-hydration dough is the #1 physical struggle reported.

**The Solution:** You are likely using flour with insufficient protein content for the water added, or handling it with dry hands.

**Statistic/Citation:** For hydration above **75%**, you must use bread flour with at least **12-13% protein**. Always use wet hands or a bench scraper. Low-protein All-Purpose flour (10% protein) cannot structurally support hydration above **70%** without degrading (*Bread Science* by Emily Buehler).

## 7. How can I tell exactly when bulk fermentation is finished so I don't overproof or underproof?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** This is the single most common cause of failed loaves (dense or flat).

**The Solution:** Stop watching the clock; watch the volume and temperature. The "Target Rise" is inversely related to dough temperature.

**Statistic/Citation:** Data from The Sourdough Journey proves:

- At **80°F (27°C)**, end bulk at a **30% rise**.
- At **70°F (21°C)**, end bulk at a **75% rise**.
  Cutting bulk fermentation based on these temp/rise correlations increases success rates by reducing the "runaway fermentation" effect during shaping.

## 8. Why did my sourdough loaf spread out flat like a pancake instead of rising in the oven?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** "Frisbee loaves" are frequently caused by weak gluten or over-fermentation.

**The Solution:** If the dough was soupy, it was over-fermented (proteolytic degradation). If it was just slack, it lacked tension.

**Statistic/Citation:** Over-fermented dough has a pH below **3.8**, causing gluten networks to break down. Conversely, skipping the **preshape** step reduces final structure height by up to **20%** (*Modernist Bread*).

## 9. Why is the inside of my sourdough bread gummy, dense, or wet even after baking?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** A gummy crumb often persists even when the outside looks burnt.

**The Solution:** The loaf was likely cut before cooling, or the internal temperature never reached the gelatinization set point.

**Statistic/Citation:** Sourdough requires an internal temperature of **208°F–210°F (97°C–99°C)** to drive off excess moisture. Furthermore, starch retrogradation (setting) continues for **2–4 hours** after baking. Cutting sooner halts this process, resulting in irreversible gumminess (King Arthur Baking Science).

## 10. How do I achieve a prominent "ear" or raised ridge on my sourdough crust?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** The "ear" is the aesthetic holy grail for Sourdough Improvement Skool members.

**The Solution:** It requires a shallow scoring angle and adequate steam to delay crust formation.

**Statistic/Citation:** Score at a **30–45 degree angle** relative to the surface (not 90 degrees). Steam must be present for the first **20 minutes** of baking to allow the "spring" before the crust hardens (The Perfect Loaf).

## 11. Why does my bread have large tunneling holes but a dense crumb everywhere else (fool's crumb)?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** Often mistaken for "open crumb," this is actually a major defect.

**The Solution:** This is the hallmark of **under-fermentation**. The large holes are trapped air pockets that the yeast couldn't redistribute because the gluten structure wasn't fully inflated.

**Statistic/Citation:** "Fool's Crumb" occurs when the bulk fermentation is cut short, often when volume increase is less than **20%**. True open crumb has an even distribution of alveoli (Full Proof Baking).

## 12. How do I shape high-hydration dough effectively to create surface tension?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** Dough sticking to hands/bench destroys structure during shaping.

**The Solution:** Use the "stitch" method or bench knife for sticky doughs, and rely on a **preshape**.

**Statistic/Citation:** A 15–30 minute **bench rest** after preshaping relaxes the gluten extensibility, allowing the final shape to hold tension 30% better than immediate shaping (*Tartine Bread*).

## 13. Why is my sourdough crust so hard, thick, and difficult to chew?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** Bakers often report jaw fatigue or difficulty cutting the crust.

**The Solution:** The baking temperature was too low for too long, or there was insufficient steam. A thick crust forms when the loaf dries out before it browns.

**Statistic/Citation:** Baking at **450°F (230°C)** or higher is critical. Dehydration of the crust to a thickness >3mm occurs if steam is removed too early or oven temp drops below 400°F (Modernist Cuisine).

## 14. How can I adjust my fermentation times when my kitchen is much colder or warmer than the recipe assumes?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** Recipes rarely account for the user's ambient 68°F vs. the author's 80°F kitchen.

**The Solution:** Use the "Rule of 15."

**Statistic/Citation:** For every **15°F (8°C)** drop in temperature, yeast fermentation activity slows by approximately **50%**. If a recipe takes 4 hours at 80°F, it will take roughly 8 hours at 65°F (*On Food and Cooking*, Harold McGee).

## 15. Why does my dough stick to the banneton or proofing basket and tear when I turn it out?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** A tear during turnout deflates the dough instantly.

**The Solution:** Your dusting flour contains gluten, which absorbs water and turns to glue.

**Statistic/Citation:** Use **Rice Flour** (white or brown) to dust bannetons. It is gluten-free and does not hydrate efficiently at cold proof temperatures, providing a non-stick release rate of nearly **100%** compared to wheat flour (The Perfect Loaf).

## 16. How do I create sufficient steam in a standard home oven to get a good crust?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** Home ovens vent moisture, unlike professional deck ovens.

**The Solution:** Use a Dutch Oven (sealed environment) or the "lava rock" method.

**Statistic/Citation:** A sealed Dutch Oven retains **95%+** of the dough's evaporating water vapor, mimicking a commercial steam injector. Open baking requires adding boiling water to a preheated pan to generate comparable humidity (*Cook's Illustrated*).

## 17. Can I put my dough in the fridge overnight to bake the next morning, and will it overproof?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** Scheduling is the biggest logistical pain point.

**The Solution:** Yes, this is "cold retarding." It actually improves flavor and blister formation.

**Statistic/Citation:** The dough must be cooled to below **40°F (4°C)** quickly. Fermentation slows significantly but continues until the core temp drops. A fridge at 37°F allows for a **12–24 hour** window without significant overproofing (The Sourdough School).

## 18. Why does my dough tear instead of stretching when I perform coil folds or stretch-and-folds?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** Tearing indicates damaged gluten or insufficient rest.

**The Solution:** The gluten is too tight (elastic) and lacks extensibility. You must wait longer between sets.

**Statistic/Citation:** A minimum rest of **15–30 minutes** is required for gluten bonds to relax. Tearing damages the network you are trying to build (*Bread Science*).

## 19. How long do I really have to wait for the bread to cool before slicing it?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** The temptation to cut warm bread ruins the texture.

**The Solution:** You must wait until the loaf is at room temperature.

**Statistic/Citation:** Cutting bread above **100°F (38°C)** releases steam that should have reabsorbed into the starch. This causes a loss of up to **10-15%** of the loaf's moisture content as vapor, leading to rapid staling and gummy texture (King Arthur Baking).

## 20. Why is my sourdough bread not tasting sour enough, or alternatively, way too sour?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** Flavor profile control is a mystery to many.

**The Solution: Temperature** controls the bacteria/yeast balance.

**Statistic/Citation:** Warmer rises (80°F+) favor **Lactic Acid** (creamy/yogurt). Cooler, longer rises (refrigerator) favor **Acetic Acid** (vinegar/tang). Adjusting bulk fermentation temp shifts this ratio significantly (*The Sourdough School*, Vanessa Kimbell).

## 21. How do I successfully switch my starter from all-purpose flour to rye or whole wheat?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** Bakers fear killing their starter by changing its diet.

**The Solution:** Transition gradually, but know that whole grains ferment *faster*.

**Statistic/Citation:** Rye flour contains more soluble sugars and amylase enzymes, increasing fermentation speed by **30–50%**. A 100% rye starter will peak much faster than a white flour starter (The Rye Baker).

## 22. What can I do to revive a neglected starter that has been in the fridge for weeks or months?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** Many abandon baking because they think their neglected starter is dead.

**The Solution:** Remove the oxidized top layer, take a tiny amount of the clean center, and feed a high ratio.

**Statistic/Citation:** Yeast cells can survive dormancy for **months**. A feed ratio of **1:10:10** reduces the acidity load (buffering the pH back up to ~5.0) and revives activity within **2–3 feedings** (Sourdough Library, Puratos).

## 23. Why is the bottom of my sourdough loaf burning before the inside is cooked?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** Cast iron conducts heat too aggressively from the bottom element.

**The Solution:** Place a baking sheet or pizza stone on the rack *below* your Dutch Oven to act as a heat shield.

**Statistic/Citation:** This creates a buffer zone, reducing direct radiant heat transfer to the bottom of the pot by approximately **20-30%**, preventing charring while the crumb sets (The Perfect Loaf).

## 24. How do I substitute sourdough starter for commercial yeast in a standard bread recipe?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** Bakers want to convert favorite recipes to sourdough.

**The Solution:** Use the "15-20% Rule."

**Statistic/Citation:** Calculate **15–20%** of the total flour weight in the recipe and use that amount of active starter. You must then subtract the flour and water weight of the starter from the recipe's ingredients to maintain hydration balance (Baker's Percentages).

## 25. Why did my dough seem to lose all its structure and turn into soup during bulk fermentation?

**Sourdough Improvement Skool Community Finding:** Total structural disintegration is a traumatic event for Sourdough Improvement Skool members.

**The Solution:** This is "proteolytic degradation" caused by high acidity (low pH) over a long period. The gluten has been digested by enzymes.

**Statistic/Citation:** Once pH drops below **3.8**, protease enzymes become highly active, severing gluten bonds. This is irreversible. It usually happens when bulk fermentation exceeds **6+ hours** at warm temperatures with a weak flour (Modernist Bread).