



ANSON MILLS

Red Fife Natural Levain

Yield

100 grams of levain

Time

40 to 60 hours, depending on the climate

Cooking Remarks

Use a digital kitchen scale to weigh out ingredients. Weights are important to the success of bread recipes. You'll also need to pay attention to the temperature of each element that contributes to the recipe, including ambient temperature, as well as the temperature of the flour. The best tool for the job is a digital instant-read thermometer.

Once the levain has been mixed, it will feel most comfortable in an environment in which the ambient temperature is between 70 and 80 degrees Fahrenheit. Higher temperatures will occasion rapid development that can produce off-flavors; lower temperatures will cause the levain to move sluggishly. Maintaining a consistent temperature will also allow the aforementioned strains of yeasts and bacteria to flourish and assist in the development of a bread culture unique to your own kitchen.

If baking naturally leavened bread is only an occasional endeavor in your home kitchen, you may wish to maintain your levain under refrigeration. At such drastically lower temperatures, feedings are needed only once a week. However, after some time in the fridge, acetic acid will start to dominate the levain, producing an acidity that's puckery and harsh like vinegar. Before you use the levain to make bread, you'll need take steps to adjust its acidity. Remove it from the fridge and bring it to room temperature, rousing it from hibernation, then feed it with flour and water (refer to step 3 of the recipe for instructions) once a day for three days. The ferment's lactic profile will normalize and the levain will be ready to use.

Equipment Mise en Place

For this recipe, you will need a digital kitchen scale; an instant-read thermometer; a small saucepan; two pint-sized, wide-mouthed mason jars (with measurement markings on the side); and a small silicone spatula; and a 4-inch square of doubled-up cheesecloth.

Ingredients

for the spontaneous ferment

50 grams spring or filtered water

50 grams Anson Mills Rustic Red Fife Bread Flour, freezer-cold (about 5 degrees)

for each feeding

50 grams Anson Mills Rustic Red Fife Bread Flour, freezer-cold (about 5 degrees)

50 grams spring or filtered water

Directions

- 1. *Make the spontaneous ferment:*** In a small saucepan, warm the water to 100 degrees. Pour the water into a clean, pint-size mason jar (the type with measurement markings on the side), then spoon in the cold flour. With a small silicone spatula, thoroughly mix the ingredients; the water and flour must be completely homogenous, with nary a clump. Make sure to check the bottom and sides of the jar for any dry patches, then scrape down the sides so you may get a good reading of the volume; you should have just shy of 100 ml. Using a clean instant-read thermometer, take the temperature of the slurry; it should register about 70 degrees, a good temperature for the initial fermentation. Cover the jar with a 4-inch square of doubled-up cheesecloth and secure the cheesecloth with the lid's metal band. Make sure there are no gaps that might allow unwanted visitors, such as fruit flies, to enter. Set the jar in a spot where the ambient temperature is about 70 degrees. At warmer temps, the fermentation will kick off at a faster rate; in colder climes, it will be slower to initiate.
- 2.** Every 12 hours or so, uncover your slurry and give it a stir with a clean spatula, then scrape down the sides of the jar and replace the cheesecloth and metal band. Stirring incorporates yeasts from the air that have landed on the surface, encourages even fermentation, and may slightly hasten the process. Each time you stir, note the volume, aroma, and flavor. Minor changes will be detectable after about 24 hours.
- 3. *Feed the levain:*** After about 45 hours at an average ambient temperature of 70 degrees, your slurry will have transformed into a levain. It will be bubbly with carbon dioxide and its volume will have increased to about 150 ml but it should not have any liquid (which would be ethanol) on its surface. If it does, don't fret—simply stir in the liquid and proceed; the levain will simply be a litter slower to react to the feeding. In a small saucepan, warm the water to 100 degrees. Pour the water into a second clean, pint-size mason jar. To the warm water, add 10 grams of the levain; discard the remainder. Stir with the small silicone spatula until well combined. Now add the cold flour and stir until homogenous, as you did a couple days ago when making the slurry, then scrape down the sides of the jar. Clean the sides of the jar, cover with the metal lid, and loosely seal with the band. Allow the mixture to ferment for 24 hours at the same ambient room temperature.
- 4.** Repeat the feeding process for the next couple of days, with one feeding of fresh flour and water each day; discard the remaining levain each time. Feed the levain at an hour that works best for you and try to space the feedings 24 hours apart. After a total of 3 feedings, you will have a yeasty, bacterial culture—i.e., levain—that can be employed in naturally leavened bread recipes. Refer to specific bread recipes for detailed instructions on how to condition your levain for the recipe you're preparing.