Daniel's Bread Recipe

Makes two loaves; can be halved for one loaf.

To make the starter:

In a mason jar or other suitable container, thoroughly mix 60g all-purpose flour with 60g warm water. Place lid over jar but do not screw tight. Store in a warm or warm-ish place.

After a few days or so---sometimes longer---it should start to bubble and show signs of life. At this point, discard around 80% - 90% of the starter, and add an additional 60g flour plus 60g water. Stir thoroughly; place back in warm area.

Keep this up for a decent amount of time---a couple of weeks, maybe. You want to really build up the microbe community. (I made a few really crummy loaves my first few times because I hadn't given the starter enough time to mature.) When your starter can rapidly grow (preferably double) the flour / water mixture in a few hours, you have a good stable starter and can precede with the recipe. I like to use the starter for a recipe when it's at its peak, a few hours after I've given it a feeding.

NOTE: I keep my starter in the fridge between bakes. My starter is vigorous enough that I can take it out, allow it to warm up and became smooth again, discard 80% of it, feed it, and it will double quite quickly. Then I use the starter and place it back in the fridge. This saves lots of flour that would otherwise go to daily feedings. I have also started saving the 80% of the starter that I discard, which I can use to make sourdough waffles, pancakes, etc.

To make the leaven:

The night before the bake, take 33g of the starter and put it in a small-ish mixing bowl with 205g warm water. Mix them thoroughly, then add 156g flour. Cover it with a lid or towel and let it rest overnight in a warm spot.

The next morning, the leaven should look bubbly and alive like your starter. I like to test it by taking a spoonful of the stuff and dropping it in a glass of warm water. If it floats, then you know you have a strong leaven and you can go ahead with the bake. If it doesn't float, I'd advise discarding it so you don't waste any more flour. Try discarding/feeding your starter a couple of times throughout that day to perk it up, then re-try the leaven that night for the next day.

To make the bread:

With your good leaven ready to go, take a large bowl and mix the leaven with 555g of water. (**NOTE:** on particularly humid days, I like to use a little less water, as some of the ambient moisture in the air will naturally find its way into the dough; too much humidity can result in a denser, flatter loaf. On humid days, experiment with, say, 30g less water and see if that helps; if the dough still ends up too saturated, try 45g the next humid day, etc.)

Once the leaven and water are mixed, add 1020g all-purpose flour. Mix well until it's a shaggy but fairly defined mass of dough. Let rest ("autolyse") for around half an hour.

After autolyse, dump the dough onto a floured work surface, sprinkle 3tsp of salt into it, and knead vigorously for around 10 minutes. (**NOTE:** if you have a stand-up mixer you can do it there; it is so much easier. I have one but apparently it's not high-enough torque or something, and it started smoking as it was kneading. So I knead by hand now.) I generally have to be somewhat generous with the flour during the kneading process, though not overly so, as too much flower can affect the final bake.

After kneading, lightly oil a large bread bowl and drop the dough in. Cover the bowl with a moist dish towel and find a warm place to set it.

Allow bulk fermentation to proceed. I generally let it go for around three to four hours, sometimes slightly longer. Here the loafsters have a motto: "Watch the bread, not the clock." You'll want to look for a generous increase in the size of the dough, preferably a doubling; you'll also want to see nice fat gas bubbles forming in it. Generally, however, if it's in a warm-enough spot and your leaven was good, then upwards of four hours is a safe bet.

Every forty-five minutes or so, I like to **fold the dough**---I wet my hand, reach down along the side of the dough, grab it, and fold it up over onto itself; I do this on all four sides of the dough. This increases the strength of the gluten, it folds some air into the dough, and it also deflates some of the larger gas bubbles, making for a more evenly-dispersed crumb structure.

After bulk fermentation is done, dump the dough out onto a lightly floured surface. Using a bench knife (I got this one), divide the dough in half. Shape the dough into boules: take one of the dough hunks, tap it down slightly to flatten it out a bit, grab each corner and side of the dough and fold it into the center. (See here for an

example of this, but **note:** I don't "degas" as assertively as the woman in the video does.)

Once you've got the corners and sides folded in, flip the dough. Now you're ready to tighten the dough up to generate good surface tension. I like to use my bench scraper for this; it's hard to explain, so here is a video of how to do it. I have had really good success with this method.

Once your dough is shaped into boules, dust the tops with flour and leave them on the countertop, covered with a dishtowel, for about thirty minutes.

Use your bench scraper to scoop up the loaves. Place them in a proofing basket with the folded seam side up and the taut side down. Honestly, I have tried all sorts of proofing baskets, and the ones that work perfectly for me are these banneton ones. If you are using these, make sure they are generously floured.

Cover baskets with dish towels and let them proof in the warm spot for another two or so hours. Watch the bread---you want it to expand nicely. If you touch the dough with a finger and it slowly comes back, it is good to go.

Preheat the oven to 500 degrees with a Dutch oven or combo cooker inside. I love my Lodge combo cooker---it is one of my favorite pieces of cookware. You want to cook in a covered receptacle because the moisture from the bread, in a closed environment, will create *just* enough steam to delay the formation of the bread's crust until the last moment, thereby ensuring a good rise before the crust forms.

Once the oven is preheated, remove the receptacle and overturn the proofing basket above it (you'll have to work to get your aim right so that the dough lands squarely in the middle). Scour the top of the loaf with a razor blade or lame; I like an X pattern. Cover the receptacle, put back in the oven, and bake for fifteen minutes. Uncover the receptacle and bake for an additional twenty minutes.

Remove from oven, place on cooling rack, and let it cool for a couple of hours; this allows the interior steam to fully finish cooking the loaf, and it lets the moisture in the bread distribute properly. Cut too early and you're risking a dense, chewy crumb.

Enjoy!