



# Life *OF A* Loaf

AT SAN FRANCISCO'S TARTINE BAKERY  
& CAFE, CHAD ROBERTSON MAKES A BREAD  
THAT'S SO GOOD (AND LONG-LASTING)  
IT'S THE BASIS FOR A WEEK OF DISHES  
HERE, HE SHARES HIS BASIC LOAF  
AND SEVEN RECIPES IN WHICH IT STARTS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY Eric Wolfinger  
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# Tartine Country Bread

*Loaves made with a natural leaven keep for a week—one reason Robertson prefers this time-honored technique.*

## MAKES 2 LOAVES

Robertson describes a starter—a mixture of flour, water, wild yeasts, and bacteria—as a baker's fingerprint. Making one is simple, but it does require a commitment: Count on feeding and caring for the mixture for three weeks before you start baking. For something closer to immediate gratification, begin using the starter after five to seven days, or order a fresh starter at [kingarthurfLOUR.com](http://kingarthurfLOUR.com). (Keep in mind, the flavor won't be as complex.) Another secret to baking like a pro: Weigh all the ingredients—even the water—using a kitchen scale that includes metric measurements.

INGREDIENT	QUANTITY
<b>FOR THE STARTER:</b>	
White bread flour	1,135 grams
Whole-wheat flour	1,135 grams
Water (lukewarm)	455 grams
Water (78°)	100 grams per feeding

<b>FOR THE LEAVEN:</b>	
Water (78°)	200 grams

<b>FOR THE DOUGH:</b>	
Water (80°)	750 grams
Leaven	200 grams
White bread flour	900 grams
Whole-wheat flour	100 grams
Salt	20 grams

## MAKE THE STARTER:

1. Mix white bread flour with whole-wheat flour. Place lukewarm water in a medium bowl. Add 315 grams flour blend (reserve remaining flour blend), and mix with your hands until mixture is the consistency of a

**I**T'S 5 P.M. AND A LAZY QUEUE has begun to form at San Francisco's Tartine Bakery & Cafe. It resembles the line that forms each morning, when eager patrons wait for sugar-dusted morning buns, frangipane croissants, and thick slices of quiche. But in the afternoon, it's all about Chad Robertson's bread. Just before dinnertime, his deeply browned country loaves, considered by cognoscenti to be the best bread in the city, emerge from the oven, only to sell out almost immediately.

Robertson's road to the perfect loaf has been a long one. After graduating from the Culinary Institute of America, he apprenticed with bakers in the United States and France before settling in California. Thirteen years ago, he opened his first bakery (with now-wife and pastry chef Elisabeth Prueitt), in Point Reyes Station, California, a tiny seaside town an hour northwest of San Francisco. He rented a house, built a brick oven on the property, and then spent the next six years mastering his bread, which is made with a natural leaven rather than commercial yeast, giving the finished loaves a complex flavor. In 2002, he and Prueitt headed to San Francisco's Mission District to open Tartine Bakery & Cafe, where they've baked ever since.

Naturally fermented bread, which begins with a starter, is Robertson's signature loaf and the one that forms the basis of many of his recipes. After the advent of commercial yeast in the mid-19th century, artisanal bread in the United States was all but wiped out, only to be resurrected by intrepid bakers here and abroad in the 1980s and '90s. Although it takes more time to make (the starter must be fermented for about three weeks to develop the necessary flavor and volume), the results are unparalleled. Robertson believes that his style of bread—with a thick, burnished crust and a moist interior shot through with holes—is something everybody can create in their own ovens.

His latest cookbook, *Tartine Bread* (Chronicle; 2010), from which the basic country bread recipe here is excerpted, demystifies the process for home bakers. While writing it, Robertson gave his recipe to a handful of friends to put his theory to the test. "I was actually astonished by the quality of the bread they made," he says. "It was every bit as good as what I make at the bakery."

Robertson notes that some professional bakers frown upon eating bread warm from the oven, before it has had time to cool and fully develop its flavors. But he's not immune to the joy of tearing into a freshly baked loaf. He often dunks the pieces into the bakery's house vinaigrette with shallots and herbs. But he recognizes that eating the bread immediately—as many of his customers likely do, unable to resist the overwhelming scent of fresh bread—is just one of countless possibilities. "Bread made with a natural leaven keeps for a week," he says. "There's fresh bread with jam, open-faced sandwiches made with day-old slices, bread salads, bread pudding, French toast. A loaf of bread can feed you for a long time." Once the bread is stale, Robertson repurposes it into croutons and bread crumbs, both sweet and savory, which he sprinkles atop ice cream or folds into an omelet.

Although most bakers rise in the wee hours of the morning to bake, Robertson has adjusted the schedule in order to make time for his 3-year-old daughter, Archer, and to accommodate the pastry baking that dominates the bakery's deck ovens all morning. But baking in the afternoon has also allowed Robertson to pursue his other love, surfing. Most mornings before heading into the bakery, he spends some time in the frigid waters off San Francisco's Ocean Beach. "As with baking, there's only so much you can control out in the water," Robertson says. "But when it's good, it's so good."



thick, lump-free batter. Cover with a kitchen towel. Let rest in a cool, dark place until bubbles form around the sides and on the surface (image A), about 2 days. A dark crust may form over the top. Once bubbles form, it is time for the first feeding.

2. With each feeding, remove 75 grams; discard remainder of starter. Feed with 150 grams reserved flour blend and 100 grams warm water. Mix, using your hands, until mixture is the consistency of a thick, lump-free batter. Repeat every 24 hours at the same time of day for 15 to 20 days. Once it ferments predictably (rises and falls throughout the day after feedings), it's time to make the leaven.

**MAKE THE LEAVEN:**

3. The night before you plan to make the dough, discard all but 1 tablespoon of the matured starter. Feed with 200 grams reserved flour blend and the warm water. Cover with a kitchen towel. Let rest in a cool, dark place for 10 to 16 hours. To test leaven's readiness, drop a spoonful into a bowl of room-temperature water. If it sinks, it is not ready and needs more time to ferment and ripen. As it develops, the smell will change from ripe and sour to sweet and pleasantly fermented; when it reaches this stage, it's ready to use (image B).

**MAKE THE DOUGH:**

4. Pour 700 grams warm water into a large mixing bowl. Add 200 grams leaven. Stir to disperse. (Save your leftover leaven; it is now the beginning of a new starter. To keep it alive to make future loaves, continue to feed as described in step 2.) Add yours (see chart), and mix dough with your hands until no bits of dry flour remain (image C). Let rest in a cool, dark place for 35 minutes. Add salt and



remaining 50 grams warm water. Fold dough on top of itself to incorporate (image D). Transfer to a medium plastic container or a glass bowl. Cover with kitchen towel. Let rest for 30 minutes.

5. The dough will now begin its first rise (bulk fermentation), to develop flavor and strength. (The rise is temperature sensitive; as a rule, warmer dough ferments faster. Robertson tries to maintain the dough at 78° to 82° to accomplish the bulk fermentation in 3 to 4 hours.)

6. Instead of kneading, Robertson develops the dough through a series of "folds" in the container during bulk fermentation. Fold dough, repeating every 30 minutes for 2½ hours. To do a fold, dip 1 hand in water to prevent sticking. Grab the underside of the dough, stretch it out, and fold it back over itself (image E). Rotate container one-quarter turn, and repeat. Do this 2 or 3 times for each fold. After the 3 hours, the dough should feel aerated and softer, and you will see a 20 to 30 percent increase in volume. If not, continue bulk fermentation for 30 minutes to 1 hour more.

7. Pull dough out of container using a dough spatula. Transfer to a floured surface (image F). Lightly dust dough with flour, and cut into 2 pieces using dough scraper. Work each piece into a round using scraper and 1 hand. Tension will build as the dough slightly anchors to the surface as you rotate it. By the end, the dough should have a taut, smooth surface.

8. Dust tops of rounds with flour, cover with a kitchen towel, and let rest on the work surface for 20 to 30 minutes. Slip the dough scraper under each to lift it, being careful to maintain the round shape (image G). Flip rounds floured side down.

9. Line 2 medium baskets or bowls with clean kitchen towels; generously dust with flour. Using the dough scraper, transfer each round to a basket, smooth side down, with seam centered and facing up (image H). Let rest at room temperature (75° to 80°), covered with towels for 3 to 4 hours before baking.

**BAKE THE BREAD:**

10. Twenty minutes before you are ready to bake the bread, preheat oven to 500°, with rack

in lowest position, and warm a 9½-inch round or an 11-inch oval Dutch oven (or a heavy oven-proof pot with a tight-fitting lid).

11. Turn out 1 round into heated Dutch oven (it may stick to towel slightly). Score top twice using a razor blade or a sharp knife. Cover with lid. Return to oven, and reduce oven temperature to 450°. Bake for 20 minutes.


12. Carefully remove lid (a cloud of steam will be released). Bake until crust is deep golden brown, 20 to 25 minutes more.

13. Transfer loaf to a wire rack. It will feel light and sound hollow when tapped. Let cool.

14. To bake the second loaf, raise oven temperature to 500°, wipe out Dutch oven with a dry kitchen towel, and reheat with lid for 10 minutes. Repeat steps 11 through 13.

*The following recipes are best when made with Robertson's bread. But if you can't wait to try them (or aren't close enough to pick up a loaf at Tartine Bakery & Café), use the best-quality store-bought sourdough you can find.*





PROFESSIONAL BAKERS OFTEN FROWN  
UPON EATING BREAD before it cools AND  
DEVELOPS ITS FLAVORS, BUT ROBERTSON ISN'T  
IMMUNE to the joy of tearing into a fresh loaf.

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**STARTER TO FINISH**  
A common belief is that starters vary from place to place, owing to the yeasts present in a certain area. The truth is that most starters contain the same dominant strains of yeast and bacteria. What makes them, and the resulting bread, different, has to do with the baker's care and feeding of the starter's mix.