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Life Lessons From Baking My Own Bread

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Life Lessons From Baking My Own Bread

By Emma Gisclair
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There's no one-size-fits-all recipe of instructions that will ensure happiness and success for everyone.



(Photo by Mehriban Aliyeva on iStock)

No matter where I go on the internet right now—Tik Tok, Instagram, Reddit—I can't escape it: images of delicious, fresh-baked bread. It seems like everyone is baking during stay-at-home orders. Maybe it's merely a way to fill the time or the result of bread shortages early in the

pandemic. Maybe the methodical tasks of measuring, mixing and kneading give people a sense of comfort or control or accomplishment that is sorely needed at this moment in time.

All I know is that I'm horribly jealous.

When all of this started, I had three packets of yeast. I have yet to find more. A batch of croissants used up most of my supply and the final, precious packet now sits waiting in my kitchen cabinet, while I am filled with indecision about what to make with it.

But then everyone on my Twitter feed started talking about sourdough starters. *Perfect!* I thought. I had plenty of flour; I had water. Mix the two and leave it on your counter for a few days and you'll have natural yeast with which to make bread, the internet promised.

If what worked for someone else doesn't work for you, it doesn't mean you're a failure and it doesn't necessarily mean they are wrong.

So I tried it...and I failed. After four days, the frothy bubbles that were supposed to signal healthy, active yeast were nowhere to be found. Rather than giving up, I did some research. I read blog posts with step-by-step instructions and helpful images. I learned about feeding my starter—that I should have been adding more flour and water every day to encourage growth.

I tried again. I was meticulous, measuring my ingredients and feeding at the same time every day. Day 3 showed some promise, with the starter growing and bubbling like my instructions said it should. And then...it stopped. Undaunted, I kept feeding it daily for a week. After all, the blog I was following had said this might happen. But as the days went on and my starter continued to show no signs of life, I was forced to face the possibility that I was wasting flour (now another difficult-to-find product) for nothing.

I tossed out this second attempt and dove into more research. I read blogs; my husband sent me YouTube videos. I quickly became overwhelmed. Should I start with a half cup of flour or two tablespoons? Is it best to begin feedings on day two or three? Was my mistake only feeding it once a day instead of twice? Did I need to buy a special type of flour or add pineapple juice or invest in a kitchen scale for more accurate measurements?

What I've learned is that the answer to all these questions is...maybe. Or maybe not. Every sourdough starter is different. They are living organisms and, consequently, there is no cut-and-dried, foolproof method to cultivate one. While I wanted a set of strict instructions to follow, what I needed to do was observe my starter, respond to its unique needs, and find the method that works for my starter and our circumstances. I'm taking a break for now, but when I try again (and I will), that is what I'll do.

I've been thinking since then about sourdough starters and life. How there's no one-size-fits-all set of instructions that will ensure happiness and success. How we sometimes try to give life advice as if our own experiences are universally applicable. How overwhelming it can be when

it seems like everyone has an opinion about what you should study in school, how to raise your children, what you do with your money, when and who and if you should marry.

In my life, this has never been truer than right now, as I prepare for the birth of my first child. Everyone, whether they've had children, has offered me advice in the past eight months. Only buy the sleepers with zippers. No, the ones that snap are best. Epidurals are wonderful; epidurals are terrible. How can you put your child in daycare with strangers?

Usually this advice is well-intentioned. People want to help; they want to pass on what they've learned from their own experiences. But it's important to remember that people are living organisms obviously, each with different backgrounds, personalities, wants and needs.

If what worked for someone else doesn't work for you, it doesn't mean you're a failure and it doesn't necessarily mean they are wrong. It just means that you're your own person. So in life, like in sourdough starters, take the advice that works for you, throw out the rest and don't worry if you fail a few times along the way.

Forge your own path.

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