

There was a time in the past when most people lived their lives without categorizing their activities as “work” or “play.” Vestiges of that belief are still visible today—contests such as rodeos or archery competitions, “bake-offs,” or even county fair exhibits hark back to a time when the featured skills were necessary for survival.

That might be why many hobbies are really fine-tuning abilities that once were a necessary part of life. Baking is in that category.

Sometimes, it is fun to explore a process that is not crucial to life, but one that makes our days more interesting.

I buy dry yeast by the pound, because I bake all of our bread as well as rolls, coffee cakes, and other yeasted products. But, as useful as baking with commercial yeast is, I sometimes want to employ a different method. Then, I get out the sourdough jar.

I’ve had my present sourdough starter for at least five years. I use it regularly, since when it is “fed,” or renewed by stirring in water and flour, the process results in more starter. If one did not use it, give it away, or discard some of it. the starter would expand and expand until there was no container large enough to hold it.

Directions for feeding sourdough usually include a statement similar to this: “Feed the starter and discard half of it.” Well, I have no intention of throwing away perfectly good sourdough starter. I would give some away, and I have, but not many people want to bake sourdough bread. So, instead, I find ways to use the excess starter.

I add sourdough starter to the breads I leaven with dry yeast. This practice keeps the starter at an amount that is fine for the glass jar I use. But, it is also fun to experiment with sourdough breads and with other foods in which the starter can be used.

There are many recipes for using sourdough, and I have tried several of them. Some have been successful, while others were “Xed out” of my recipe collections.

One recipe that I use fairly regularly is for sourdough waffles. There is no need to use additional flour with the starter—just eggs, melted butter, a bit of sugar, and a little baking soda dissolved in a tablespoon of water. The waffles are airy and crisp and very good—that is, as long as we eat them immediately after they come from the waffle iron. Left for a few minutes, they become soggy, limp, and rather unappetizing. But, Blue and Kate do not care. They smell waffles from the far corners of the yard and come running for dinner on those days. And they get their share.

Zingerman’s, the famous food establishment in Ann Arbor, published a cookbook a few years ago. After checking this book out of the library several times, I bought it. And, the recipe I use most is for their Roadhouse Bread, the loaf they use for the sandwiches that the deli serves. That bread is completely leavened by sourdough. I make it every now and then.

Lately, though, I have been playing with “off the cuff” sourdough baking, not using a recipe at all. I feed some starter, leave it on the kitchen counter in a covered bowl, and forget about it for several hours. Then, when I remember

to look at it again, if it is bubbly and “light,” I add other ingredients to make bread dough. This usually involves nothing more than a little water, salt, and some kind or kinds of flour. After a slight kneading, I more or less forget about the dough for hours.

Sometime later in the day, I think about that dough again, lift the dinner plate that I have used to cover the bowl, and see a round, light ball of dough. Later yet, risen again in loaves or other shapes, into the oven it goes, and we soon are rewarded with fresh bread.

During these pandemic months, I have tried to use up small amounts of ingredients that have languished in the freezer, sometimes for months. Often, these are grains or flours that I had purchased for some specific recipe and had put the leftovers in the freezer. Yesterday, my sourdough loaves contained a goodly amount of barley flour. They rose nicely, and we will enjoy the result as garlic bread with our noon meal.

I remember being fascinated with the stories of bachelor gold miners making “top of the sack” biscuits. The idea was that they simply poured a measure of sourdough starter into the top of a flour sack and used what the wet ingredients needed to make biscuit dough. Saved a bowl! I don’t expect to try that method.

Every couple of decades, or maybe more often somewhere in the world, a kind of sourdough starter makes the rounds among a community of cooks. My mother had this mixture once, this version called “Herman.” I don’t know where the name originated, but nearly everybody who cooked or baked had a jar of “Herman” in the refrigerator. As I remember, it was mostly used to bake a kind of coffee cake that used both “Herman” and some baking soda or powder. Again, like with regular starter, “Herman” had to be used or given away to keep it under control. Once, my mother’s recipient of this dubious gift kept the starter in a very tight jar—not a good idea. The container blew its lid in her refrigerator, and she had bits of “Herman” all over the contents of her fridge. Sometimes, there are consequences to not following instructions.

I love my sourdough starter. It has developed a nice flavor over the years, changing in character, using the organisms it picks up in our environment. It is creamy white in color and has a mildly sour, almost nutty aroma. I give it a cup of water and a little more than a cup of flour every few days, always using the excess in some way. I haven’t named my sourdough starter, but if I ever do, I won’t call it “Herman.”