

This evening I took the jar of sourdough starter from the refrigerator, poured some out into a large bowl, then added water and some more flour to what was left in the jar. Now, it will sit on the kitchen cupboard until morning, hopefully not overflowing in the meantime. I should have removed a little more from the jar, but am trusting to luck that it will not make a mess on the counter.

I added water and flour to the starter I had poured into the bowl, and the consistency is about like a thin cake batter. This time, it is barley flour that I stirred into the starter. I covered the bowl and left it on the cupboard. Tomorrow, I will add more flour and salt to make a bread dough. Pure bread—nothing but flour, water, salt, and some kind of yeast—in this case, sourdough starter.

I am fascinated by fermentation. It is such a useful phenomenon in relation to food preparation and preservation and demonstrates so clearly the role of life in our food. To watch flour and water bubble and expand while producing a deliciously pungent aroma to accompany the mixture that will cause even more flour to rise into perfect loaves of bread—this is one of the natural processes that is endlessly interesting.

And, it is not the only instance of fermentation we deal with in the kitchen. Every fall, we shred numerous heads of cabbage, mix the chopped vegetables with a little salt or salt and whey, and pack them into jars, tamping down the mixture until it is covered by its own juice. We sometimes add sliced carrots, onions, garlic, and herbs to the cabbage. A zip-lock bag filled with water tops each jar and keeps the air out but lets liquid rise as the veggies ferment. In a few weeks, we have delicious sauerkraut.

Then, there is cheesemaking. Home cheesemakers usually add “starters” to milk to control the fermentation. But, we also make cottage cheese with no additives at all outside of what the environment of our own surroundings add. Cottage cheese was the only kind my mother made, but it was a simple process. She filled a large kettle with milk, set it on the coolest place on the wood burning cookstove so it stayed warmish but didn’t get hot. In about twenty-four hours, the milk had solidified into a shiny curd. My mother broke up the curds with her bare hand and moved the kettle to a little warmer place on the stove. Stirring occasionally, she also dipped off the whey that came to the surface. Eventually, when she felt the curds becoming firmer, she squeezed them dry with her hands and filled a bowl. After refrigeration and salting, the fermentation process—with a little help from my mother—had produced a nutritious and tasty cheese. I make it the same way every summer.

Winemaking and brewing are also fermentation processes. All of these methods of preserving foods—while increasing their appeal—began as ways to keep food from spoiling. But, fermentation also added complexity and flavor to foods. A loaf of sourdough bread would certainly create more desire in an eater than a bowl of wheat and water—the basic ingredients in bread.

I have had my sourdough starter for many years, and I understand that such mixtures become specific to their environment. A sourdough starter such as the famous San Francisco sourdough will change when kept for a time in

another place. I assume that our bread has a flavor that is distinctly Coe Creek . That same starter, sent to a cook in the Keweenaw Peninsula here in Michigan, will have a different taste. And the dried starter I mailed to a friend in Sweden is surely, by now, Ånimskog surdeg.

And that sourdough jar that I worried about? Well, it looks as if it has expanded just enough to fill the jar, but it shows no sign of overflowing its container. But, it is plenty lively enough to make a well-risen loaf.