

Troubleshooting a New Sourdough Starter

The “Stall Point” Test

By Tom Cucuzza, *The Sourdough Journey* © October 2023

In the typical lifecycle of a sourdough starter, you will often see vigorous activity in days 1-3 of creating a new starter. This activity is the “bacterial bloom” where all of the different types of bacteria from your bag of flour are fighting for dominance. This is a “false rise” and is often mistaken for strong yeast activity. It is not.

After that initial surge of activity, your starter will typically then “go quiet” for three days of slow growth (typically days 4, 5 and 6). If, by Day 7, you are still seeing minimal (or no) bubble activity, your starter may have hit a “stall point.”

The stall point can occur due to three issues:

- 1) Low yeast population – Some bags of flour contain fewer microbes
- 2) Timing - Discarding and feeding per a fixed schedule is weakening your starter, or
- 3) Acidity - Your starter has become very acidic, and the acid is choking off the yeast production.

If your starter is not showing significant bubble activity by the end of Day 6 (the Day 7 feeding time). I suggest performing the **Stall Point Test**.

The Stall Point Test

The test requires three jars:

Jar #1) Your main starter jar

Jar #2) A jar for your Day 7 discard / un-fed starter

Jar #3) A jar for a “micro-feeding”- acidity test

To perform the test, on Day 7:

- Step 1: Remove all but 25g of starter from your main jar, and move that discarded starter to Jar #2.
- Step 2: Feed your main starter (Jar #1) the normal feeding (50g flour blend and 50g water).
- Step 3: In a clean jar (Jar #3), add 30g of water. Dip a spoon in the discard (Jar #2) coating the front and back of the spoon (about 5 grams). Stir that spoon in Jar #3 until the spoon is clean and it is dissolved in the water. Add 30g of your flour blend to Jar #3 and stir it up. Jar #3 is now a “micro-feeding” of your main starter with a much higher feeding ratio (about a 1:6:6 ratio).

The Three Samples

You now have three samples for the test:

Jar #1 – Your main starter with a fresh feeding (25g carryover, 50g flour, and 50g water)

Jar #2 – Your main starter, unfed (100g of discard from your main starter)

Jar #3 – Your main starter with a very high feeding ratio (~5g discard, 30g flour and 30g water)

Observe and compare the bubble activity (or rising) of the three samples in 24 hours.

Jar #1 is your baseline sample

Observe your baseline sample compared to previous days (is it growing?) and compare its activity to Jar #2 and Jar #3.

Jar #2 Feeding Interval Test

After 24 hours, if Jar #2 shows **more activity** than Jar #1, this indicates that the unfed “discard” is more active than the “fed” starter. This means your 24-hour feeding frequency is too short. Your main starter will benefit from and strengthen with a longer feeding interval (e.g., 36 or 48 hours). This result is common if your kitchen is cold. Your starter simply needs more time to strengthen before each discard and feeding. Stretch out your discard and feeding times to 36 or 48 hours. Watch for peak bubble activity.

If Jar #2 shows **less activity** than Jar #1, in 24 hours, this confirms that your feeding interval is not an issue. Dispose of the contents of Jar #2.

Jar #3 Acidity Test (24 and 48 hour tests)

If Jar #3 shows **more activity in 24 hours** than Jar #1, this confirms that your main starter is **too acidic**, and it will benefit from a higher feeding ratio, which reduces the acidity.

If Jar #3 shows **less activity in 24 hours** than Jar #1, let this sample continue, as is for another 24 hours.

If Jar #3 shows **more activity in 48 hours** than Jar #1, it confirms that your main starter is **too acidic**, and it will benefit from a higher feeding ratio, which reduces the acidity.

If Jar #3 shows **less activity in 48 hours** than Jar #1, it confirms that your starter is not stalled due to acidity.

If Jar #3 shows more activity in 24 or 48 hours than your main starter, you should dispose of your main starter and use 25g of starter from Jar #3 as the carryover for your main starter at the next feeding.

If your starter is acidic, it will likely be sufficiently de-acidified from the one-time high feeding ratio, and you can continue with the normal 1:2:2 feeding ratio per the original schedule. If the starter stalls out again, then carryover 10g of starter and feed it 50g flour and 50g water per day (1:5:5) ratio instead of the 1:2:2 ratio, going forward.

If both Jar #2 and Jar #3 look better than your main starter, choose the best looking of those two, and use that as your new, main starter.

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