

Sourdough Starter Refrigerator Maintenance Methods

By Tom Cucuzza, The Sourdough Journey® January 2025 ©

Maintaining a sourdough starter can be challenging for busy people. Many home bakers find it impractical to keep a starter at room temperature and feed it one or more times per day. **A recently-fed starter, used at peak, will always produce the best results**, but there are ways you can use your refrigerator to manage your starter maintenance.

Below are the five most popular methods.

These examples assume a single-loaf batch requiring 100g of leaven. A “leaven (or levain)” is an offshoot batch of starter prepared for baking. The “mother” is the source starter used to create the leaven. A large batch of “mother” starter can also be used as the leaven. Excess leaven not used in baking can become the “mother.”

1. Mother Lives in the Fridge – Always keep your primary starter in the fridge

Make a batch of starter (100-200g) and when it begins rising, put it in the refrigerator. Each time you plan to bake, **take a small amount (10-20g) from the fridge** and use it to create the amount of leaven needed for baking. Always use a small amount (10-20g) with a high feeding ratio (e.g., 1:5:5). When you are down to a small amount remaining in the fridge (20g), give the fridge starter a large feeding and repeat the process. Refresh at least every 30 days. This method minimizes discard but can become acidic over time.

2. Mother Visits Once a Week – Use and replenish your refrigerated starter every seven days

If you bake once every seven days, make 20g more leaven than needed for the recipe. After mixing the dough, feed the 20g of excess leaven the amount of flour and water needed for next week (50g flour and 50g water). As soon as you feed it, put the 120g in the refrigerator. You can use it **in seven days, directly in your dough** without feeding again. Some people let it rise at room temperature before using it in the dough. Repeat the process each week. This is a “no discard” method for weekly bakers.

3. Mother Gets a Makeover – Strengthen your starter as needed for infrequent baking

If you bake infrequently (less than once a week), and have an unpredictable schedule, keep a small amount of starter in the fridge (less than 50g). **One or two days before you plan to bake**, discard most of your refrigerated starter **and give it a few peak-to-peak, high-ratio feedings** (e.g., 1:5:5) at room temperature. Usually, the second or third feeding will bring your starter back to strength. The next feeding is your leaven. Prepare the amount needed (100g) plus some extra (20-50g). After mixing, put the excess leaven, unfed, in the fridge until needed. This method produces a strong, healthy starter from the fridge – with some discard.

4. Mother is Always Available – Always keep a recently-fed starter in the fridge

If you don't have a regular baking schedule and always want to have a leaven available for baking, feed your starter the amount you will need for baking (100g) plus 20-50g excess and **refrigerate it as soon as it peaks** after feeding. You can use it **directly from the fridge, in your dough, at any time for 1 to about 7 days**. If you don't bake within 7 days, remove it from the fridge, discard most of it, refeed, and repeat the process. A starter stored at-peak performs surprisingly well, but its performance deteriorates a bit each day.

5. Mother is on Rotation – Replace your refrigerated starter with fresh, excess leaven each time you bake

With this method you constantly **replace** a small, refrigerated “mother” with some excess leaven from the most recent bake. Remove a small amount (10-20g) of mother from the fridge, and in a second jar, feed it the amount needed for the recipe plus some extra (20-50g). Use the amount of leaven needed in your recipe (100g) and **replace the mother jar** in the fridge with the fresh, excess leaven. This is a two-jar, rotational method and is a “low discard,” method for bakers who bake roughly once a week. Some bakers make the exact amount of leaven needed, and only refrigerate the jar “scrapings” (<5g) from the previous leaven. This is the “Scrapings Method” from Jack Sturgess at *Bake with Jack* – a “no discard” version of this method.

When is it best to refrigerate your starter after feeding ?

If you plan to use your starter in less than seven days, let the starter peak before refrigerating it.

If you plan to use your starter in exactly seven days, feed your starter and refrigerate it immediately.

If you are unsure when you will use it, let your starter nearly peak before refrigerating it.