

# SOUR AND THE GLORY

Artisan bakers are passionate about their sourdough and its health benefits but there's foment about some ferment. Your daily bread may not be what it seems

A friend of mine takes his sourdough bread seriously. In 2006, using a recipe from a Californian bakery, he made his own sourdough culture – a mix of flour and water left to ferment naturally – to be used as the starter for every batch of bread he baked. The theory was great. The practice turned out to be slightly more problematic. Rodney's sourdough “baby”, he quickly found out, required almost as much care as the real thing.

Regular feeding and attention were crucial, so each day he took his sticky creation on the bus to work with him, accompanied by its packed lunch of flour and water. At frequent intervals, and with colleagues politely averting their gaze, Rodney “fed” his voracious sourdough baby and when he went on interstate business trips his wife was left with strict instructions to ensure the new addition to the family thrived.

While many would have been tempted to call in counsellors to deal with a chap who boarded the bus each day with a fermenting ball of dough, it turns out Rodney is far from alone in his devotion to traditional sourdough methods. All around the country, artisan bakers are continuing a breadmaking process dating to 10,000BC,

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which relies on the lengthy fermentation of dough by the natural microflora present, without the use of baker's yeast or additives. A piece of this dough is then kept to seed the following batch and so on. And all around the country, ripples of discontent are surfacing among these same bakers, who are appalled at the rising number of breadmakers passing off “fake sourdough” as the real thing. “The classic imitation sourdough is a standard baker's yeast dough with souring agent added to make it taste sour,” says Graham Prichard,



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“It is common for naturally fermented sourdough to ferment for 24 hours or more over several stages,” Prichard explains, “which makes it taste sour as well as helping to pre-digest components that may otherwise cause digestive issues. Fake sourdough additives are often so sour that they give people a bad taste.”

West Australian baker Kingsley Sullivan, director of New Norcia Bakeries, is one of the most vocal defenders of traditional methods and has long fought to get a standard definition of the word “sourdough” approved by Food Standards Australia New Zealand. “The matter has been bugging me for 20 years,” Sullivan says. “Evidently the bakers making fake sourdough are saying that yeast is yeast regardless of whether it is natural sourdough ferment or not. Baker's yeast and natural yeast used in genuine sourdough bread are completely different and it should be shown clearly on the label or in ingredient information what is used. There are so many people thinking they are eating sourdough bread who are in fact eating very ordinary yeast bread with the addition of some obscure powders.”

A major concern, say Sullivan and fellow baker Allison Arnott, of Morpeth Sourdough in NSW, is that consumers may buy fake sourdough, mistakenly thinking it will offer health benefits over other, commercially yeasted breads. Arnott, a food scientist, says the extended fermentation period of authentic sourdough renders the carbohydrate more digestible in the gut, overcoming



issues of bloating and allergies, and giving it a low glycaemic index. “Doctors are recommending sourdough to diabetics and other patients for the health benefits but how does the consumer differentiate from the fake and the real products on the market?” she asks.

Another issue of concern for consumers is cost. “Producing authentic sourdough takes around 30 hours from start to finish. Making yeasted bread takes about an hour or two,” says Arnott. “The fact that authentic sourdough is more expensive is a direct result of the labour cost. Now we see commercial bakeries selling their ‘fake sourdough’ at a similar price, if not higher when you take the cost per gram approach.”

An examination of bread labels at the local supermarket does indeed reveal a confusing array of ingredients, including some commercial yeast and additives, in several breads labelled sourdough. But these bakeries are doing nothing illegal. A spokeswoman for FSANZ says it would not incorporate a definition of the term sourdough into the Food Standards Code as it was a Trade Practices Act issue, which comes under the jurisdiction of the Australian Consumer Competition Commission.

Sullivan, who has previously called on the ACCC to look into the wording and descriptions used on bread

labels, says: “Our approach to the ACCC last year was answered with: ‘We believe most consumers think sourdough bread is any bread that is sour.’ Tell that to anyone who knows anything about food!” Having hit an impasse, the Artisan Baker Association is taking matters into its own hands. “What is needed is a simple graphic to clearly identify real sourdough,” says Prichard. “ABA has committed to launching a standardised labelling system for sourdough by August 1 this year. Customers will be able to look up precise details about each bakery's processes and make informed choices.”

For now, those wishing to be absolutely certain of the provenance of their sourdough could take a leaf out of Rodney's book. Three years after his foray into breadmaking, he is the proud owner of a far more manageable sourdough toddler. “The most surprising thing is how resilient it is,” he says. “It can be mistreated, misfed, left unattended in a fridge for months yet at the first sign of love and affection it will bounce right back into action.”

*A sourdough starter and various bread recipes are available from the ABA's community website, Sourdough Companion at [www.sourdough.com](http://www.sourdough.com). Michelle Rowe writes Food Detective for*

*The Weekend Australian's Travel & Indulgence section.*