

A SOURDOUGH TROUBLESHOOTING GUIDE

Why Didn't My Sourdough Work?

Find your problem in 60 seconds. Fix it on your next bake.



47 problems & guides

One problem per page

Video fixes via QR

°F & °C · grams

Proof Point Baking

THE ART OF BAKING SCIENCE

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Three steps, one fix at a time

You don't need to read this front to back. Go straight to your problem.

1

Find your symptom

Use the **Symptom Finder** (page 5), or take the **5-question check** (page 7) if you're unsure. Several problems? Start with **page 8**.

2

Find your cause

Fixes are listed most likely first. Read the sign under each cause to confirm which one is yours before changing anything.

3

Change one thing

Make one fix on the next bake and note it in the **bake log**. Two changes at once and you won't know which worked.

WHAT'S ON EACH PAGE

Four kinds of page: **Symptom** (something went wrong), **Test** (how to tell), **Rescue** (save what you have) and **Guide** (how-to and reference). Tests, rescues and guides use only the parts that apply.

The symptom

The problem in the words bakers actually use.

What's happening

What you're seeing, and the usual reason.

How to diagnose

One test to confirm the cause.

Save this bake

What to do with the dough or loaf in front of you today.

Crumb of Science

Why the fix works, without the lecture.

Photo

What good looks like, or the problem and the result side by side.

Fixes

Likely causes in order, most likely first. Each has the sign to look for and what to do.

Scan or tap

A QR code to the matching video, recipe or calculator. On a tablet, just tap it.

COLORS AND TABS

Each part has its own color, shown on the tab at the page edge. In print, flip to the tab. On screen, every page has a **← Symptom Finder** link at the bottom.

UNITS

Weights are in grams. Temperatures are in °F with °C in brackets. Times assume a kitchen at 75–78°F (24–26°C) unless a page says otherwise.



START HERE

Symptom Finder

Find what you're seeing. Tap the page number, or flip to the matching colored tab.

WHAT YOU'RE SEEING	CHECK FIRST	PAGE
PART 0 · READ YOUR RECIPE RIGHT		
● Feeding ratios confuse me	Guide	11
● The flour amounts don't add up	Guide	12
● Hydration and percentages confuse me	Guide	13
● I measure by cups, or my oven is in Celsius	Guide	14
● The timeline doesn't fit my schedule	Guide	15
PART 1 · YOUR STARTER		
● Starter won't rise or double after feeding	Kitchen temperature	17
● Starter rose, then fell before I could use it	How long ago it peaked	18
● Liquid (hooch) sitting on my starter	Time since the last feed	19
● Starter smells like nail polish, vinegar or cheese	Which smell it is	20
● Spots, streaks or fuzz on my starter	The color of the spots	21
● Starter is too runny or too stiff	Your feeding ratio	22
● Not sure if my starter is ready to use	Whether it has peaked	23
● Reviving a neglected or dried starter	How long it was left	24
● Making a starter from scratch	Guide	25
PART 2 · YOUR DOUGH		
● Dough is soupy or pours like batter	Bulk time, then water and flour	29, 31
● Dough is stiff and tears during folds	Water amount	27
● Dough barely grew during bulk	Dough temperature	28
● Dough is slack, sticky and deflating (over-fermented)	Bulk time	29
● Can't tell when bulk fermentation is done	The signs, not the clock	30
● Dough sticks to my hands, bowl and bench	Wet hands, not floured	31
PART 3 · SHAPING & PROOFING		
● Shaped dough spreads and won't hold tension	Surface tension	33
● Dough tears while shaping	How tightly you shaped	34
● Dough stuck to the banneton	How much flour is in the basket	35
● Can't tell if the final proof is done	The poke test	36
● Cold proof questions: how long, and can I skip it	Guide	37

From the oven onward

WHAT YOU'RE SEEING	CHECK FIRST	PAGE
PART 4 · IN THE OVEN		
● Flat loaf, little or no oven spring	<i>Starter, then bulk and proof</i>	39
● No ear, or the score barely opened	<i>Blade angle and depth</i>	40
● Loaf burst on the side or bottom, not at the score	<i>Proofing and score depth</i>	41
● Crust is pale and dull	<i>Oven temperature</i>	42
● Bottom is burnt before the top is done	<i>Rack position</i>	43
● Crust is thick, hard or tough	<i>Steam in the first 20 minutes</i>	44
● Loaf lopsided, stuck, or deflated in the transfer	<i>The transfer to the pot</i>	45
PART 5 · AFTER YOU CUT IT		
● Dense, tight crumb	<i>Bulk fermentation</i>	47
● Gummy or wet crumb	<i>Cooling time before slicing</i>	48
● Big tunnel under the crust, dense below	<i>Bulk fermentation, then shaping</i>	49
● Huge, uneven holes in an otherwise good crumb	<i>Shaping</i>	50
● Too sour, or not sour enough	<i>Guide</i>	51
● Bread goes stale or moldy quickly	<i>How you store it</i>	52
PART 6 · YOUR KITCHEN, FLOUR & GEAR		
● Hot kitchen: everything runs fast	<i>Guide</i>	54
● Cold kitchen: everything runs slow	<i>Guide</i>	55
● Dry or humid climate	<i>Guide</i>	56
● Baking at high altitude	<i>Guide</i>	57
● Swapping flours	<i>Guide</i>	58
● Sizing the banneton, Dutch oven or loaf pan	<i>Guide</i>	59
● No Dutch oven	<i>Guide</i>	60
● Sandwich loaf: dense, collapsed or flat-topped	<i>Proofing in the pan</i>	61
● Not sure how strong my flour is	<i>Guide</i>	62
● Gas, fan, small or lower-heat ovens	<i>Guide</i>	63

Can't find your problem? Take the 5-question check on page 7, or look it up in the glossary on page 69. **More than one problem?** Page 8 shows which ones share a cause.

SYMPTOM 4.1

My loaf didn't spring in the oven

WHAT'S HAPPENING

The loaf came out wider than it is tall, and the score stayed a thin line instead of opening.

HOW TO DIAGNOSE

Cut the loaf. Tight and dense points to under-fermentation; even and slightly coarse to over-proofing. More than one symptom? Page 8.

SAVE THIS BAKE

A flat loaf tastes as good as a tall one. Slice it for toast or sandwiches.

CRUMB OF SCIENCE

Oven spring is trapped gas expanding in the first 15–20 minutes. It needs gas, a strong skin and a soft crust.



WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

LIKELY CAUSE · WHAT YOU'LL SEE		DO THIS
1	TRY FIRST Starter not ready? It hadn't doubled when you used it.	Feed it and wait for the peak before you mix (page 23).
2	THEN Starter past its peak? It had already fallen in the jar when you mixed.	Use it at its peak, or soon after (page 18).
3	THEN Under-fermented? Tight, dense crumb; bulk was short or slow.	Give bulk more time; check the four signs (page 30).
4	THEN Over-proofed? Dough spread as soon as you turned it out.	Bake sooner: use the poke test (page 36); refrigerate the shaped loaf promptly.
5	THEN Weak shaping? Dough slumped as it left the banneton.	Build more surface tension (page 33).
6	LAST Not enough heat or steam? Pale crust; the score sealed over.	Preheat 45–60 minutes; keep the lid on or use steam for the first 20 minutes.



SCAN OR TAP
Watch explosive oven spring
The full batard method on video.

My crumb is gummy

WHAT'S HAPPENING

The inside is damp and sticky. It clings to the knife and balls up when pressed. The crust may look done, or a little pale.

HOW TO DIAGNOSE

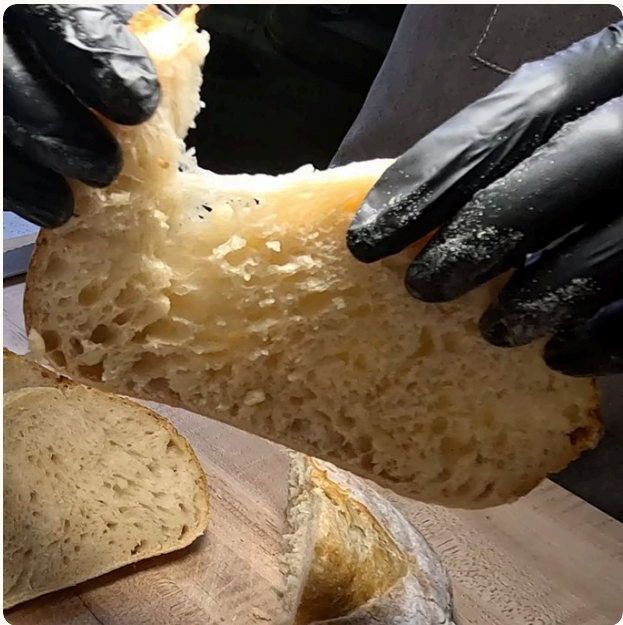
Did you cut it warm? Start there. If it had cooled, check the crust: pale or soft sides mean under-baked. Deep brown all over points to fermentation or water.

SAVE THIS BAKE

Toast the slices, or put the cut loaf back in a 350°F (175°C) oven for 10–15 minutes to dry the crumb.

CRUMB OF SCIENCE

The starches set as the loaf cools. Cutting early lets steam escape before the crumb has firmed.



DRY AND SPRINGY: PULLS APART CLEANLY

BAKER'S TIP

Not sure it was done?

Go by color first: deep golden brown all over, including the sides. If you own an instant-read thermometer, push it through the base into the center: 205–210°F (96–99°C) means done.

LIKELY CAUSE · WHAT YOU’LL SEE		DO THIS
1	TRY FIRST Sliced too soon? Cut while warm; steam rose from the slice.	Cool at least 1 hour, preferably 2. Do not slice while it is still steaming.
2	THEN Underbaked? Pale or soft sides, wet center.	Bake 5–10 minutes longer, until deep golden brown all over.
3	THEN Under-fermented? Gummy and dense, with a tight crumb.	Extend bulk (page 30).
4	LAST Very high hydration? Open crumb, but wet and shiny.	Bake longer, or lower the water 2–3%.