

Storing Yeasts & Starters

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You're cleaning up after making that warm sweet loaf of home made bread like Grandma used to make, or maybe you have just finished savoring that first slice off of another crusty loaf that you spent the last few days making. Flours are put away in their containers, bowls and utensils are washed, and the salt has been returned to the back of the stove. What about your leavening, that starter you worked so hard to keep going, or the yeast you have in jars or packets?

Dry yeast is easy to store and the freezer is the best place for all types of packaged yeast. Fortunately, yeast doesn't take up much space. A deep freeze is best if you have one, because it is much colder than a refrigerator's freezer compartment. In saying that, don't despair, your refrigerator's freezer will keep the yeast cold and works very well. I have had dry yeast remain fresh up to a year and I use it directly from the freezer. It is very important to keep yeast in an airtight container to prevent any moisture from getting inside. Once moisture makes contact with the yeast, the yeast will begin to activate and lose its oomph. When I buy in bulk I reuse my yeast jars, after cleaning them very well and ensuring they are totally dry before putting any yeasts back in them. I wash mine in hot soapy water, and then put them in the dish rack to dry. Dryness is important here, as stated earlier we don't want the moisture to activate the yeast. To label the bottles, I use simple white address labels and either a permanent marking pen, or even a crayon. I make sure to put the label on while the jar is about room temperature, which keeps it from peeling off so easily in the freezer. If you are not using yeast by the jar, out of one-pound packages, like I do, or tend to use the foil packets, the unopened packages may be stored in a cool dry place for long periods. To find out just how long, check the package expiration date. They also can be put in the freezer. Erring to the side of caution, I will put them in zip lock backs or tight Tupperware containers. Keep out that moisture!

I have never used compressed yeast, but it too can be stored for long periods, although if one is using compressed yeast, I would think it would not last long enough to lose its potency.

Compressed fresh yeast, which is the most perishable and lasts only two to four weeks in the refrigerator, will stay active for at least six months in the freezer. It needs to be defrosted before use.¹ Set out what you will use for the day, let it soften and warm to room temperature before use. This should take roughly 10 to 20 minutes depending on the amount.

For those of you who may be wondering about yeasts for brewing or vintning, storage is really along the same lines. If you are using dry yeast there is not a whole lot of difference, whereas using liquid yeast, keep it in the refrigerator. Liquid yeast is very much akin to the compressed fresh yeasts. Pay attention to manufacturer's instructions and the expiration date on the container.

At this point we move to the homemade preferment, the starters. Things with interesting names like biga, levain, poolish, barm, chef, pâte fermentée and even good American sourdough. These are leavenings you work over, speak softly to, and coax along to maturity. Generally something like a pet, albeit one that sort of lays there and occasionally gets discovered way at the back of the fridge trying to break out to eat your cucumbers. How do we keep these plant colonies around so that we may recreate their uniqueness?

Most starters are of a consistency equal to pancake batter. We can treat them like any sourdough. There are several ways to store a "starter", as explained below:

Refrigerating: Once your sourdough starter is safely in the refrigerator, it will need a little attention, although once it's cold and relatively dormant, it can survive quite a long time between "feedings." It is certainly not as demanding as children or more traditional pets, but it won't just sit for months on end like a packet of commercially dried yeast either. I keep my starters in quart mason jars with secure lids to prevent cross contamination.

Freezing: You may be able to ignore your starter for a month or even much longer, but if you know you're going to be away for a time, you can store it, unlike children or pets, in the freezer. You may want to transfer it to a plastic container first since it will expand as it freezes.

When you are ready to use it again, give it a day to revive, feed it a good meal, give it another day to build up an armada of fresh, new wild siblings and it will be ready to go to work.

Drying: An alternative storage method is to dry your starter by spreading it out on a piece of heavy plastic wrap or waxed paper. Once it's dry, crumble it up and put it in an airtight container. Store it someplace cool or, to be safe, in the freezer.

I have frozen pâte fermentée (another type of starter that is simple bread dough) in the freezer, as a matter of fact several of the breads I made as payment to Mistress Gwyn were from a starter I had used for her Vigil at Jubilee 2003. I try to get them out and make bread with them about every three months maximum, refreshing them and keeping their legacy going. Make extra, I try to put aside and store about eight to sixteen ounces of this starter. Weigh and roll it into balls, wrap individually and freeze. Once frozen I pop them all into a labeled freezer bag to keep them from disappearing into all the little nooks and crannies in my freezer (trust me on this one).

I have dried several different starters. First was ale barm I received from my local brewer. Following advice from a Civil war reenactor I poured out a little on a plate spreading it thin and let it dry. Once dry, I added a little more until a thick layer was formed. Scraping that off the plate, I put it in a freezer bag and stored it like dry yeast. That way my brewer can be surprised at a later date with bread made from the lees he gave to me. I have also dried sourdough starter and stored it in the freezer with no ill effect. It is an excellent way to save your sourdough in case you have that one special breed and are afraid of killing it.

For example, something you bought on the Internet from Egypt and you don't want to lose the entire colony because you forgot to care for it.

In closing, this is not intended to be an in depth paper on yeast storage but more along the lines of a simple guide, a starter if you will about storing leavenings. Nor is it intended to detail how one should care for their jars of cultures fermenting away in the cold recesses of one's refrigerator. The thing to keep in mind whether you are refrigerating, freezing, drying or just keeping your leavening in a cool place on a shelf maintain it in a clean tightly sealed container with room for expansion. This will keep moisture from invading your dry yeasts and prevent cross contamination of your wet starters.

- 1) *O Chef* "How to Store Yeast" 19 Feb. 2004. <http://www.ochef.com/280.htm>
- 2) Sands, Brinna B. *The King Arthur Flour 200th Anniversary Cookbook*. Woodstock, Vermont: Countryman Press, 1992. Pg 527.