



Why Serious Bakers Have Mother Issues

Andrea Strong



A sourdough starter, also known as a "mother." [Photograph: Shutterstock]

They came from all over Europe—a village in Poland, a farm in Tuscany, a town in Bordeaux. They were carried across the continent, and trekked from the Old Country to the New World. There were arrests and clashes with the police. But through a combination of luck and love, they arrived in New York City where they now work quietly, often in the small hours of the morning. Not many people have even seen them; just a modest, elite group of artisans truly know them intimately. The bakers know their mothers, and these are their stories.

But, wait, perhaps I should clarify. These aren't their actual mothers, as in the women who gave birth to them, who raised them, who are now, undoubtedly, the subject of therapy for one 45-minute hour per week. No, no. These are their "mothers"—also known as *madre*, seed, chef, and *levain*. Natural yeasts starters destined for some of the world's best sourdough breads, typically born of a combination of apples, grapes, and honey, left to ferment on a warm windowsill and grow a frosting of wild yeast and *Lactobacillus* bacteria. Yup, *those* mothers.



[Photograph: Vicky Wasik]

Mind you, starters do share qualities often associated with matriarchs (...and pets)—they often inspire love-hate relationships marked by serious dependency. Unlike commercial yeast, which requires little more than sugar and warm water to activate, mothers are needy. They demand regular feedings of flour and water in order to produce the organic acids, alcohols, and carbon dioxide necessary to make bread do that cool thing it does: rise. Bread made from wild ferments don't just give them that characteristic tangy sourdough flavor—they also improve the bread's texture, nutritional value, and shelf life.

This rigorous regimen of constant attention can become difficult for anyone who might want to have a life outside the confines of the bakery. (*You don't call! You don't visit!*) Chad Robertson, the breadmaker at [Tartine Bakery](#) in San Francisco and a leader of the wild-fermentation movement, used to bring his starter to the movies with him so that he could feed it on time. And who can forget the monolithic mother from Anthony Bourdain's memoir *Kitchen Confidential*, which Adam the baker was tasked with feeding. "The bitch," described Bourdain, was "a massive, foaming, barely contained heap of fermenting grapes, flour, water, sugar and yeast." A mommy monster!

To be sure, there are easier, less taxing ways to get a rise out of flour and water than coaxing mold out of rotting fruit. There's that convenient little envelope filled with commercial yeast. But given the Brooklyn-to-Portland rise in artisanal, DIY everything, the wildly-fermented mother has become the darling of the craft bread movement. Indie bakers would rather starve than bake predictable, personality-less loaves made from commercial yeast. Instead, they're playing wet-nurse to wild yeasts, obsessively feeding their goopy, gloppy slurries with their eye on the prize: Heartbreakingly beautiful breads with unparalleled flavor, shattering crusts, and a cavernous crumb.



[Photograph: Vicky Wasik]

The other rather priceless quality mothers share is that, like wine, natural yeast starters also have terroir—while all mothers include the same strain of bacteria, they pick up their personalities from a region's yeast, flour, air, and water. All of those magical microbes get infused into the starter, like a strand of DNA that gives every mother a unique fingerprint—hence why you'll find sourdoughs labeled by provenance, from the iconic [San Francisco starter](#) to their East Coast and European brethren.

In fact, if you stick your nose inside a jar filled with starter, it's like you're inside a wine cave. Your head is dizzy with the musty, sour sweetness of fermenting grapes. "It's those acids and alcohols that contribute to the bread's flavor, texture, and keeping quality," explained Scott Kendall, Head Baker at Le Pain Quotidien's Fashion Island Bakery in Newport Beach, CA. "Even if the recipe is the same, regional changes will affect the yeast and beneficial bacteria strains grown in the levain. A sourdough made in Southern California will have subtle variations in texture and flavor to those made in New York, London, Paris, and around the world."

With proper love and attention, mothers can live a long, long time, and they often have mythic, legendary histories. The story goes that when a woman was getting married, her mother would send her off with a piece of her dough. This way, her daughter would not have to wait two weeks to create a new starter of her own, she'd be able to bake the next morning (right to work, missy!) The other advantage, of course, is that the mother becomes a kind of family heirloom, passed from generation to generation, a lifeline in every loaf. All of which goes a long way to explaining why some the best bread you're eating right now was born from a mother with a history all her own.



Saci's soudough ciabatta and sourdough cereal bread with cracked wheat, sesame and sunflower seeds, flaxseed, and millet. [Photograph: Vicky Wasik]

Kamel Saci, the head baker at New York City's [il Buco Alimentari](#), made his mother nearly twenty years ago when he was a teenager living at home in Bordeaux. A Mixed Martial Arts fighter, Saci was injured in a judo match at the age of 19 and tore his ACL. While recovering from surgery, he took a job at a bakery. "I walked in with no experience and they taught me how to bake, and how to start a mother, and I fell in love."

Saci made his mother from a combination of honey, apples, and grapes left out in the warm kitchen until a bloom of mold developed. He and his mother have been together ever since, traveling the world. From its birth in Bordeaux, his mother accompanied him to Paris, where he worked with master baker Eric Kayser, to London, where he was Head Baker at Aubaine and worked for Joel Robuchon and Pierre Gagnaire. Then it was on to Barcelona where he opened Baluard's, then to Miami at Le Rendez-Vous, and finally in 2011, to New York City, to open Alimentari where he bakes 500 loaves a day—Ciabatta, Filone, Focaccia, Figs and hazelnuts, Country, and Buckwheat sourdough—and many more.

Not that these journeys have always been seamless. Saci has been detained twice by airport police—once in New York and once in Mexico City—and questioned about the mysterious liquid he had frozen in a container in his carry on. But he and his mother were freed without incident. "I said, I am a baker, this is my mother, and it was okay. They let me keep it. I was glad because I would have been very sad to lose my mother," he said.



Kamel Saci [Photograph: Noe DeWitt]

Not surprisingly, Saci takes very good care of his mother. On Mondays, he feeds her a mixture of flour and room temperature filtered water. 12 to 16 hours later, often sometime between midnight and 2 a.m., he returns. The question of sleep is a good one; Saci says he usually catches a few winks around 9pm, before waking to make the dough: mixing the mother with additional flour and water, which activates for one hour. Then comes the salt, and more resting, this time for about two to three hours. Then an hour in a proofing bowl, after which it's shaped and left in the cooler for 24 to 48 hours before it's baked and makes it onto your plate, where chances are it will disappear within a minute or two.

Though Saci has cared for his mother since he was a teen, he isn't stingy with it. He shares it freely. "It's something I made, it comes from my experience, and I like to share a part of me," he said. When Justin Smilie, the acclaimed former chef of Alimentari, left to open his own restaurant, Upland, Saci handed him a jar; a piece of his mother tucked inside. "I gave it to Justin to make pizza," he said. "I taught him how to take care of it. And when I was there and I had his pizza, and it was so good, I thought, they are taking good care of my mother."



Eli Zabar with his breads [Photograph: Brice Toul]

Other bakers also share their mothers. In the late 1980s, **Eli Zabar**, the owner of Upper East Side institutions such as Eli's, EAT, and The Vinegar Factory, was on a quest to find a good Jewish cornbread: a super dense grainy rye, which actually has no corn flour in it, but has cornmeal dusted on its bottom to prevent it from sticking to the bread peel. "I was looking for a cornbread roughly the weight of a bowling ball," Zabar said, in all seriousness. "I dreamed of slicing it thin and eating with the fresh unsalted butter." (Are you getting a Larry David visual here, because I am.)



Eli Zabar's classic sourdough. [Photograph: Vicky Wasik]

Anyway, through word of mouth, Zabar learned of a bakery in Tarrytown making Jewish cornbread and decided to pay a visit. There he met a Mr. Schwartz. "He was in his 80s, working with his son, and he was in fact making the most delicious cornbread I've ever had in these big wood-fired ovens," recalled Zabar, who continued to travel up to the bakery to get to know Schwartz and, obviously, to buy more bread. One day, Schwartz handed him a bucket. It was filled a shimmering blob: a piece of his mother, the one his family originally brought over from Poland before World War II. Nearly every slice of bread you eat at Eli's today is made from Schwartz's starter, still going, still giving life to bread. "Ten years ago, I was in one of my stores and Schwartz's son came in to say hello," said Zabar. "His father had passed, but I thought, in some ways, he lives on in our bread."



Jim Lahey's truccione saré sourdough. [Photograph: Vicky Wasik]

Jim Lahey, the award-winning baker behind [Sullivan Street Bakery](#), says he'll give a piece of his mother to anyone who asks. "I probably shouldn't say that, because I'll have a line at the bakery for mothers tomorrow," he added, with a laugh, "but I'm happy to share it."

Lahey made his mother at a turning point in his life, while traveling through Europe in the early '90s. "I was a young kid, I had been kicked out of art school, and I was trying to learn to bake," he recalled. "I wanted to find something that spoke to me, something that I felt comfortable doing, something that gave me a form of pleasure. That, I found, is the making of the bread."



Jim Lahey [Photograph: Squire Fox]

Living on a farm in Tuscany, he lifted the bloom off a black kale leaf and made his mother. "I knew you could lift a must from grapes and fruit, and I thought I'll try to lift it from the leaves of some black kale, and feed it flour and water." And so his unique mother was born. He brought it back to New York City and started baking with it, using it to launch his now renowned Sullivan Street Bakery.

Nearly 30 years later, Lahey's mother is still working, being fed a very strict diet of flour and water, with trace quantities of salt. "My mother lives in a retirement home for old sourdoughs in Pensacola," said Lahey, chuckling to himself. (Baker humor, gotta love it.) In reality, his mother is not playing Mahjong, but is living in a production kitchen on West 47th Street, where it's fed at 4 a.m. daily and left out to ripen and make bread. "We rot it, portion it, form it, design it, mold it, proof it, and then bake it," said Lahey by way of explanation. "It's not easy. Fermentation is a moving target. It's like life. You have to know when to fold it, know when to hold it, know when to walk away. (Yes, you can sing that last sentence.) That's the practice of bread."



Jean Paul Bourgeois [Photograph: Melissa Hom]

Jean Paul Bourgeois, the chef at Blue Smoke in New York City, uses a mother that was a gift, but whose origins he cannot divulge. "My mother was given to me by a chef friend," he said. "But he asked that I never tell anyone where he got it from. All I can say is that it comes from one of the best bread bakers in the world," he told me, in a hushed, James Bond, 'if I tell you I will have to kill you' tone.

Whatever its origin, Bourgeois is very fond of his mother. "The mother does two essential things to my waffles—its sour fermentation gives the waffles a unique savory tang, and the natural rise makes the waffles fluffy and delicate, airy and crispy." But Bourgeois says his mother gives the waffle something more. "When you use a mother, you are telling that story of something handed down from generation to generation," he said. "I feed my mother White Lilly flour, so I have changed it, and made it my own. As your mother is passed down, the story may change depending on the baker. But it's that story we continue to tell in every waffle we make." Which brings us back to the true nature of the mother: she doesn't make you who you are, but she sure helps you find your way.

Aug 18, 2015 9:00AM

[Andrea Strong](#)