

Sourdough Starter

Living in and near the City when I was in junior high school in the early 1970's, and then in the adjoining metropolitan areas to it during high school and college, I learned the local flavor favorite was consuming fresh sourdough bread with diced up fresh crab. Before I could drive, on a Sunday, I would take the bus into the Financial District, getting off on Mission Street just before the Financial District grab a cable car up Union just before Union Square, getting off at Ghirardelli Square, meandering over to Point Mason, Marina Green and back to Hyde Street Pier, where I would spend my money on a fresh loaf of sourdough, cajole the fisherman to clean and dice the crabmeat, find a bottle of water, a park bench in a quiet spot and devour the entire loaf with the crab, wash it all down, and then snag myself the dark chocolate of the day at Ghirardelli's.

After I obtained my driver's license, and if I had access to a car, I would convince at least one friend to take the day and we'd blast down the 80, skirting the East Bay, crossing the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, driving into my favorite parking structure along Howard Street, then walking along the Embarcadero to the Wharf District. Whenever I came back to the Bay Area during college and grad school, I would solo the effort, find a dining establishment known only by the locals to serve fresh sourdough with fresh crab, and a glass of wine. For a child of the Bay Area, sourdough and crab beats In-N-Out, and that takes some doing.

Good sourdough requires a starter; the ingredients that are then fermented over time. Sourdough fermentation relates to the origin of agriculture in the Fertile Crescent and Egypt several thousand years before 3700 BCE. Not that the original starter has been fermenting that long, but then . . .

French bakers brought sourdough techniques to Northern California during the California Gold Rush, and it remains a part of the culture of the City. Ya think? Sourdough begins with a fermented mixture of flour and water to produce a vigorous leaven and to develop the flavor of the bread. With sufficient time, temperature, and refreshments with new or fresh dough, the mixture develops a stable culture. This culture will cause a dough to rise. The bacteria ferment starches and the by-products are metabolized by the yeast, which produces carbon dioxide gas, leavening the dough.

All I know is that a hard-crust, soft-centered sourdough with the right accoutrements is not to be missed, never to be hurried, but should be eaten heartily and with great satisfaction. Otherwise, I am not sharing. I thought this over in the last three miles of my latest Boston Marathon, when I could smell freshly baked sourdough from somewhere along Beacon Street, or maybe it was Commonwealth, before the left on Hereford, right on Boylston. Even though I dramatically slowed from the top of Heartbreak to the finish, I didn't get to that point without my own starter. I had to qualify.

Just not at Boston. My first qualifying effort required a sub-2:50. I was so close for years and finally made it, racing an older version of the San Francisco (surprise) Marathon held on a cool, foggy July morning, the course covering every known road, and some unknown, in Golden Gate Park, along with a trip down and back up the Great Highway after a loop of the Fleishhacker Zoo, changing race flats at mile 16 before flying into the finish.

My next two trips to race Boston each required a sub-3:00 finish, which I earned first in Chico, California, home of one of the best party schools in the nation, though I've raced there in lieu of indulging, and in Reno, Nevada along the eastern ridge of Carson Ridge along the Sierra Nevada amidst the Pine and the White Fir. Those were my first two of many business trips: just me traveling by plane, bus, or automobile to run a marathon, run my race, and get back without my absence being noticed. I used the same business trip tactic and qualified with a 3:15 for my next Boston at a long forgotten Northwest marathon that was destroyed by the same meteor that wiped out the dinosaurs. No trace remains of that event, not even fossilized tricot running shorts, dead cotton race shirts, or racing flats with no midsole.

Then, there was a long darkness.

21 years later, much older and much, much slower, I found myself running a Southern marathon in winter for the fun of it. The first 17 miles, I accompanied a former defensive end for the University of Texas before we both realized that I could actually BQ if I left him. For some reason, I asked his permission, which he granted, and I qualified, to my utter amazement. I qualified again the next two years, just before Covid Era struck. And, I qualified for this year's Boston, post-vaccination.

Preparing and running in each of these more recent marathons, I found the starter I had long ago put away. That starter had fermented naturally over time. I hadn't known I had misplaced it, or perhaps simply forgotten it. When I found it, I rediscovered for myself the love of running, the joy of the effort, the focused means to an end, and the sheer thrill of being a runner. No apologies needed and none offered. I am careful with my starter, adding a bit of experience and a touch of respect now and then. I raced Boston, again, and that is a moment of pure pleasure unto itself.