

[Recipe] The Best Pioneer Survival Food

When cowboys hit the trail for a cattle drive, they had a long journey ahead of them.

Many drives took months, taking the crew into remote areas along the way. Outposts to buy supplies were few and far between, so the cowboys had to prepare carefully. They filled the chuck wagon with everything they needed to survive the months long journey. From sleeping rolls to cooking supplies and medical equipment, the chuck wagon was the lifeline of the drive.

Space was limited. They only had room for the bare necessities, so they selected everything with care.

Their food was simple, but filling. Cowboy biscuits were a staple.

What Are Cowboy Biscuits?

Back at the home ranch, eggs and milk helped produce fluffy biscuits. But, those farm products don't travel well and are perishable.

Cowboys had to learn to bake biscuits with just a few, travel-friendly ingredients. So, they used sourdough.



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When fed regularly, sourdough lasts a long time. It stayed in a crock or jar, not taking much space. And, it gave each batch of biscuits flavor, helped them rise, and made them hearty.

Sourdough starter was the star of cowboy biscuits. It turned plain old flour and salt into filling victuals.

Sourdough biscuits aren't as fluffy as biscuits you might be used to eating. They are denser, with an almost cake-like texture.

Cowboy biscuits also differ from traditional biscuits in the baking stage. Since there were no ovens available on the open range, cowboys baked their biscuits in cast iron skillets or Dutch ovens, over hot coals.

The Ingredients in Cowboy Biscuits

There are only three ingredients in traditional cowboy biscuits: sourdough starter, flour, and salt. The salt and flour were typical pantry staples. The flour was most often whole wheat, though the cowboys used whatever was available.

The sourdough starter was the most important ingredient.

Wild Yeast Sourdough Starter

Instead of using baking powder to leaven their biscuits, cowboys relied on yeast. But, individual yeast packets weren't available yet. Instead, they collected their own wild yeast.

Wild yeast lives almost everywhere. It's in the air, in flour, and all around. Once you capture it, you can keep it alive in sourdough starter.

Some sourdough starter recipes call for potatoes, a bit of commercial yeast, or some other host for the yeast. While some cowboys may have used a complicated sourdough recipe, most didn't.

The simplest way to [make your own yeast](#) is to combine flour and water in a clean, non-reactive container. Each day, feed it with fresh flour and water. Within a couple of days, you

will start to notice bubbles in your starter. The bubbles tell you you've successfully found wild yeast and it's starting to multiply.

When the cowboys set out on the trail, their starter was full-strength and ready to use.

Make Your Own Sourdough Starter for Cowboy Biscuits

If you want to make your own batch of sourdough starter like the cowboys did, here are directions.

You'll need:

- 1 cup whole wheat flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup lukewarm water (not chlorinated)
- A non-reactive container
- A wooden spoon
- A towel for covering your container
- Additional food and water for feeding (1 cup of flour and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of water for each feeding)

Combine the flour and water in your container. Stir thoroughly, ensuring there aren't any pockets of dry flour at the bottom.

Cover the container with the towel and leave at room temperature for 24 hours.

Examine your starter. Check for any signs of bubbles.

Whether or not you see bubbles, remove half of your starter. To the remaining half, add another cup of flour and a $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of lukewarm water.

Stir well and cover it again.

In 12 hours, your starter will be ready for another feeding. Keep half of the starter in your container and remove the

rest. Feed the starter you kept with one cup of flour and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of lukewarm water.

Stir well and cover it again.

Every twelve hours, repeat the feeding. You will always keep half the starter and feed it a cup of flour and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of water. Remember to stir and cover.

Over the next few days, your starter will begin to change. You'll notice more bubbles throughout. It will develop a distinct smell. And it'll double in bulk more quickly.

The temperature of the air in the room where your starter is in affects its growth. If it's too hot you can kill the yeast. If it gets cool, the yeast slows. When the temperature drops too low, the yeast will stop growing completely.

Out on the trail, cowboys also kept an eye on the temperature. When the weather turned cool in the fall, they took their sourdough container to bed with them. Their body heat kept it alive even when it was cold outside.

Your starter will take several days to come to full strength. Since there are so many variables, it's best to use signs instead of a specific timeline. Your starter is ready when it:

- Is bubbly throughout and appears frothy.
- Doubles in bulk within 4-6 hours of a feeding.
- Has a distinct sourdough smell (a fresh, yeasty odor)

By this point, it has the potency it needs to make your biscuits rise. Before then, it won't be strong enough.

The Discarded Starter

There's a lot of discarded starter when making your own sourdough starter. Removing starter before each feeding helps to keep your total amount of starter manageable. If you kept it all, you'd have tons of starter.

It also helps keep the PH where it needs to be. By reducing the competition for food among your yeast cells, you decrease your chance of growing the wrong bacteria.

When you take the starter out, you don't have to throw it away. Here are four suggestions for using it:

- Give it to a friend who wants their own starter
- Thin it down with a little milk and add several eggs to make sourdough crepe batter
- Add it to your compost pile
- Use it to make waffles or pancakes

How to Maintain Your Starter

Cowboys used their starter daily. Each time they made biscuits, they fed their starter. In addition to adding more flour and water, they'd mix any leftover dough back into the starter to avoid waste.



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If you aren't using your starter daily, you will need to maintain it.

You can place the starter in the fridge or a cool location. Then, just remove half of it and feed it once a week. Make sure to stir it well each time. When you're ready to use it, take it out of the fridge several hours before baking. This gives the yeast cells time to wake back up.

You can also leave your starter on the counter. This means it will be ready to use whenever you want to bake. But, it also

means need to remove and feed every day.

Decide which method works best for you. Just don't forget about your starter. If you neglect it for too long, it will mold.

If you maintain it properly, it will last indefinitely. There are sourdough starters that have been passed down throughout families for generations.

How to Make Cowboy Biscuits

Once your starter is at full-strength, you can make your first batch of cowboy biscuits.

You'll need:

- 2 cups sourdough starter
- 2 cups flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp salt
- Butter, oil, or lard to grease the skillet

In a large bowl, combine the starter, the salt, and the flour flour. Stir it well.

If your dough is too thick, slowly mix in a little water until it's the right consistency for biscuits. This happens occasionally, especially if your sourdough starter is really thick.

Grease your cast iron skillet. Pinch off golf-ball sized clumps of dough and roll them into balls. Place each ball in the skillet. Begin at the outside and continue moving in towards the center in circles of biscuits.

Set the skillet on a large rock or rack over hot coals. Bake until browned.

Or you can bake in an oven at 350 degrees for 30 minutes, or until brown.

Fluffier Version of Cowboy Biscuits

As mentioned previously, these biscuits will not be the fluffy biscuits people eat today. They are a stick-to-your-ribs, dense biscuit that travel well. Cowboys could throw a couple in their pockets after breakfast and chew on them throughout their shift.

By using a limited amount of ingredients, biscuits could be made anywhere along the trail. But, with just a couple of extra ingredients, you can improve the taste and texture of these biscuits.

You'll need:

- 2 cups sourdough starter
- 2 cups flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp salt
- 1 TBS honey
- 2 tsp baking powder
- 2 TBS lard or butter cut into small pieces
- Additional lard or butter to grease skillet

In a large bowl combine the starter, flour, salt, honey, baking powder, and lard. Mix together, forming a soft dough.

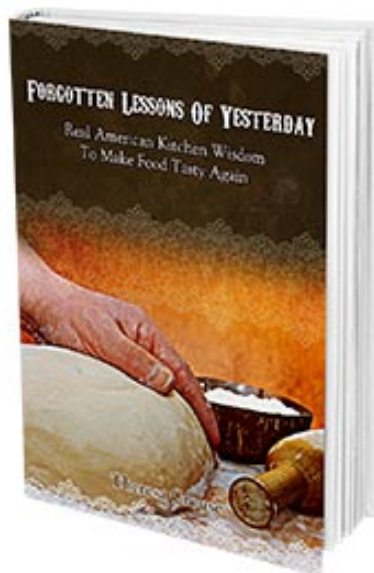
Form and bake as directed above.

Looking Back in Time for Survival Skills

Though you likely aren't setting out on a cattle drive, cowboy biscuits are a great survival recipe. They take minimal ingredients, and travel well. The sourdough can also be used for many other breads, and you won't need to worry about storing yeast.

Because of their hardness, ingenuity, and knowledge, cowboys

were able to survive for months at a time with few materials. By looking back in time, and learning the skills from the past, you can be prepared for any situation you find yourself in.



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