

*Biga (or
Bighino in
small amounts)*
Universal Starter

Many of the recipes for the classic regional breads begin with a starter dough made from small amounts of flour, water, and yeast allowed an initial fermentation and then used to infuse the actual bread dough. The starter, known as *biga* in Italy, not only gives strength and force to what in Italy are weak flours, but also produces a secondary fermentation from which come the wonderful aroma, natural flavor, and special porosity of the final loaves and wheels of bread.

I keep some *biga* on hand at all times—the contents of our refrigerator and freezer are definitely not the typical American vision with more inedible than edible contents. Still, by having it on hand, I can decide to make *pane pugliese* or *ciabatta* in the morning and have it for dinner that night.

In Italy, bakers save saltless dough from the previous day's bake to start a new dough. Because the first *biga* must come from somewhere, you may make it following the instructions below. This *biga* is remarkable. It freezes very well and needs only about three hours at room temperature until it is bubbly and active again. It can be refrigerated for about a week; after that, it gets a bit strong. When using it in recipes, it is best to weigh it, rather than measure it, for it expands at room temperature. The bakers I admire most advise ten to eleven hours for the first rise and then another three hours after

adding more flour and water, but others are very happy with the twenty-four hours it takes for dough to become truly yesterday's dough. If you like sour bread, allow your *biga* to rest for twenty-four to seventy-two hours. The important point about a starter dough is that it is very close to natural yeast and the breads made with it develop a wonderful taste because their risings are long and bring out the flavor of the grain. Another benefit is that the loaves remain fresher and taste sweeter than those made with large amounts of commercial yeast.

1/4 tsp AD yeast
.7gm / .025oz
all water by weight
245gm / 8.5oz

Makes 2 1/3 cups (about 585 grams) Biga makes ~ 576 gm / 20 oz

1/4 teaspoon active dry yeast or 1/10 small cake (2 grams) fresh yeast
1/4 cup warm water
3/4 cup plus 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon water, room temperature
2 1/2 cups (about 330 grams) unbleached all-purpose flour ~11.6 oz

1/2 tsp AD yeast
1.4gm / .05oz
all water by weight
368.55gm / 13oz

Makes 3 1/2 cups (about 750 grams) Biga

1/2 teaspoon active dry yeast or 1/5 cake (3 to 5 grams) fresh yeast
1/4 cup warm water
1 1/4 cups plus 2 tablespoons water, room temperature
3 3/4 cups (500 grams) unbleached all-purpose flour = 17.65 oz

NOTE: reduce yeast to 1 gm
(scant 1/2 tsp)

Stir the yeast into the warm water and let stand until creamy, about 10 minutes. Stir in the remaining water and then the flour, 1 cup at a time.

BY HAND

Mix with a wooden spoon for 3 to 4 minutes.

BY MIXER

Mix with the paddle at the lowest speed for 2 minutes.

BY PROCESSOR

Mix just until a sticky dough is formed.

BAKERS PERCENTAGE
flour 100
water 74
yeast .2

Rising. Remove to a lightly oiled bowl, cover with plastic wrap, and let rise at a cool room temperature for 6 to 24 hours. The starter will triple in volume and still be wet and sticky when ready. Cover and refrigerate until ready to use. When needed, scoop out desired amount.

Both recipes can easily be cut in half.

flour 500 gm / 17.6oz
water 370 gm / 13 oz
AD yeast 1 gm / .035 oz

makes 871 gm / 30.7 oz biga