

# Dutch Oven Expertise

**BY SHANNON OELRICH** *Cowboy cooking, chuck wagon cooking, campfire cooking ... whatever you call it, it wouldn't be the same without that work-horse, the Dutch oven. Robb Walsh, restaurant critic for the Houston Press, explores the history and current state of this cuisine in his new book, The Texas Cowboy Cookbook: A History in Recipes and Photos (2007, Broadway Books). Like his previous books, Legends of Texas Barbecue and The Tex-Mex Cookbook, this one takes the reader into the heart of cowboy cooking with research, interviews, recipes, old photos and plenty of humor.*

*In the following excerpt from the book, Walsh meets Brad Whitfield, award-winning chuck wagon cook for the Long X Ranch in West Texas. For those of you who want to try your hand at sourdough biscuit making, we've included two recipes for Sourdough Starter and one for Sourdough Biscuits, also from the book.*

"When I started entering chuck

wagon competitions, I was just in it for the beer drinking," Brad Whitfield told me while he cut sourdough biscuits with a well-floured topless and bottomless tin can. He crowded the biscuits in the bottom of a Dutch oven.

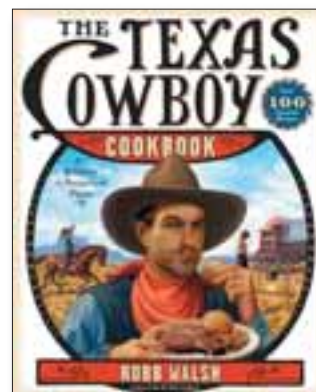
About his recipe, Whitfield said, "I mix sourdough starter, flour, salt, and sugar, and then I add a little baking soda for insurance. I never measure anything. It comes out different every time. I've been competing for six or seven years. But I won the bread-baking category in Fort Worth, Midland, and Lubbock—so now I'm stuck with cooking all the time," he moaned. "I'd rather be out punching cows."

J. Frank Dobie observed that South Texas cowboys hardly ever saw sourdough bread. "Yaller bread" was the catch-all phrase English-speaking cowboys used to describe the corn bread, corn dodgers, and hoecakes they ate in East and South Texas.

Sourdough baking is a West Texas phenomenon, according to historians.

It developed on the High Plains during the era of chuck wagons and trail drives after the Civil War, which is why it is such an important part of the chuck wagon cooking contests and demonstrations that have become popular there. The Western heritage movement sparked a revival in old-fashioned sourdough baking.

That's why sourdough is also on the menu at historic West Texas ranches like the Long X during deer hunting season, when the hunting camp is full. Hunters pay top dollar to come and hunt on the Long X, and the food is part of the appeal. Whitfield cooks for the gang from a chuck wagon that is set up in the center



of the hunting lodge area.

When his biscuits had risen enough to bake, he got a shovelful of hot coals from the fire and put them in a pile on the dirt. I asked him about his Dutch oven as he lowered it onto the coals. "I keep mine slick as glass," he told me. "When I start one out, I put Crisco on it in between uses. When you're done baking in it, you just wipe it out and grease it up heavy."

Whitfield got a second shovel load and poured it on top. The dish-shaped lid of a Dutch oven is designed to hold hot coals—with heat coming from both above and below, you can achieve the even heat required for baking. But the lid is on a swivel handle, so it has a tendency to tip to one side and dump the coals into the food. The trick to baking in a Dutch oven is in handling the pot hook. A pot hook is a metal rod with a hook designed to lift the lid of the Dutch oven.

I asked Whitfield if he ever dumps the coals onto the biscuits. "Yeah, I do," he admitted. "And any sumbitch who tells you he never has is a damn liar. I made my own pot hook in a forge. It's short and it has a thumb depression that fits me. But that lid still gets away sometimes."

The problem with baking in a Dutch oven, Whitfield confided, is that the bottom of the pot, which is sitting directly on the coals, bakes a lot hotter than the top. When he detected a strong bread yeast smell, he moved the pot off the bottom coals. "You got to let the top of the biscuits catch up to the bottom," he said, adding more hot coals to the lid.

We stood waiting for the biscuits to be done—the temptation is to lift the



lid and take a peek. But Whitfield was waiting for a telltale toasty smell. I suspect he was also looking at his watch. Finally he took off his cowboy hat and used it to fan the coals on the Dutch oven lid. "We need to turn this oven up a little," he said.

Then he expertly removed the lid. His crusty, yeasty sourdough biscuits were the best I had ever tasted.

## SOURDOUGH STARTER NO. 1 "YOGI"

- 2 cups lukewarm water (100° F)
- 1/3 cup plain yogurt
- 2 cups all-purpose flour, plus 1 cup to feed starter
- 1/4 cup dry milk powder

Whisk together the water and yogurt, then add the 2 cups flour and the dry milk powder, blending until smooth. Transfer the mixture to a 1-quart glass jar, ceramic crock or plastic container. Cover with a double thickness of cheesecloth and let stand in a draft-free spot indoors for 48 hours. When it bubbles and a gray or yellow liquid forms on the top, stir it back in. (If the liquid is red or green, throw the starter away and start over.)

After stirring back the liquid for 2 days, add 1 cup flour to feed the starter.

## FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH

Author Robb Walsh made many batches of starter for this cookbook. He found that the easiest thing to do was mix flour and water together and set it outside in his backyard in Houston on a warm day (above 80° F). He quotes John O. West, from *Collection of Texas Folklore*: "The air is full of yeast, we refrigerate to keep yeast from spoiling our foods. To get a starter, mix equal amounts flour and water to a soft paste and set in the sun in hot weather, and it will soon begin to ferment and rise." Walsh had to scrap a batch one day when he heard the mosquito truck rumbling down his street, but mostly he's had good luck with this method.

## SOURDOUGH STARTER NO. 2 "CHEATER"

If you are impatient, or you have no fermentation after 2 days, be a "Cheater" and add a pinch of active dry yeast on the second day.

*Sourdough is notoriously stubborn when it comes to rising. Every cook-off contestant we've met adds yeast or baking powder or both to speed things up. If you want to be a purist and see what it's like to use nothing but sourdough for leavening, you will need to allow as much as an entire day of rising time. If the temperature outside is higher than 70° F, put the sourdough outside to rise with a clean kitchen towel over the top of the bowl or loaf pan to keep the flies away.*

## SOURDOUGH BISCUITS

- 3 cups sourdough starter
- 1 tablespoon active dry yeast (optional)
- 3 tablespoons sugar
- 3 tablespoons baking powder
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 5 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon butter, melted

Lightly grease a Dutch oven or cookie sheet.

In a large mixing bowl, stir together the starter and dry yeast (if using) and let them sit for 5 minutes. Add the sugar, baking powder, salt and oil and mix well. Add the flour, 1 cup at a time, and mix until the dough becomes too stiff to stir. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and sprinkle some flour on top. Roll it out until it is about 1/2-inch thick. Using a circular cookie cutter, tin can with both ends removed, or a water glass, cut circles from the dough and place them on the bottom of the Dutch oven or cookie sheet. Brush the tops with the melted butter and cover with a cotton cloth.

Set the biscuits aside and allow them to rise until they double in size.

Preheat the oven to 325° F.

Bake until golden brown, about 15 minutes. Allow to cool for a few minutes; serve when they don't burn your fingers. Makes 12 to 15.

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