

Baking Basics

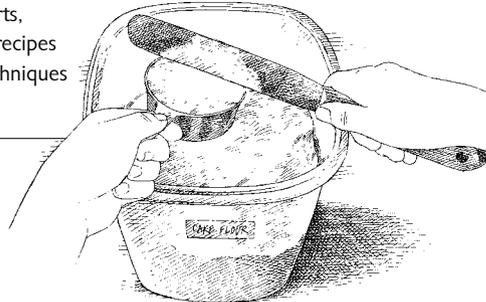
A little know-how goes a long way toward avoiding common baking mistakes. BY THE COOK'S ILLUSTRATED TEST KITCHEN

Our many years of experience in the test kitchen baking pies, tarts, cakes, cookies, muffins, and quick breads have shown us where recipes are likely to go wrong. Here are the most important tips and techniques we use to ensure successful results when baking.

MEASURING

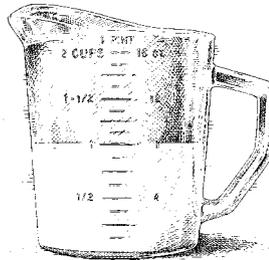
Dry Ingredients

Our preferred method for measuring dry ingredients is to “dip and sweep.” This method reliably yields a 5-ounce cup of unbleached all-purpose flour and a 7-ounce cup of granulated sugar. Dip the measuring cup into the container and scoop up the ingredient in a heaping mound. Use a straight edge to sweep off the excess, letting it fall back into the container. For absolute reliability, always weigh flour and sugar when baking.



Liquid Ingredients

To measure liquid ingredients, use a liquid measuring cup set on the counter and lean down to read the measurement at eye level. When emptying the measuring cup, use a rubber spatula to scrape it clean.

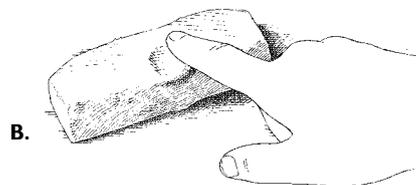
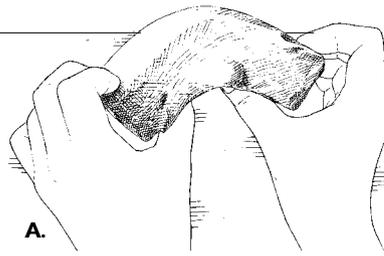


TEMPERATURE OF INGREDIENTS

Cakes and cookies often require softened butter (65 to 67 degrees) and room-temperature eggs and milk. Softened butter creams easily, and room-temperature eggs and milk are more easily incorporated than cold. The additional mixing necessary to incorporate cold ingredients may adversely affect the batter and, ultimately, the texture of the baked good.

Judging When Butter Is Properly Softened

- A.** The butter should bend with little resistance and without cracking or breaking.
B. The butter should give slightly when pressed but still hold its shape.

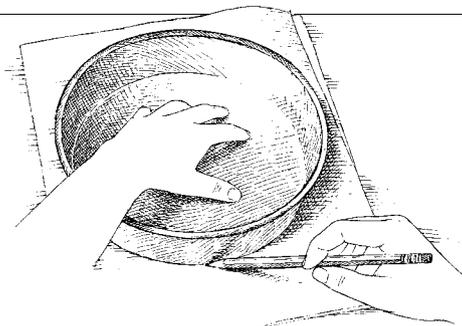


PAN PREPARATION

Parchment Paper

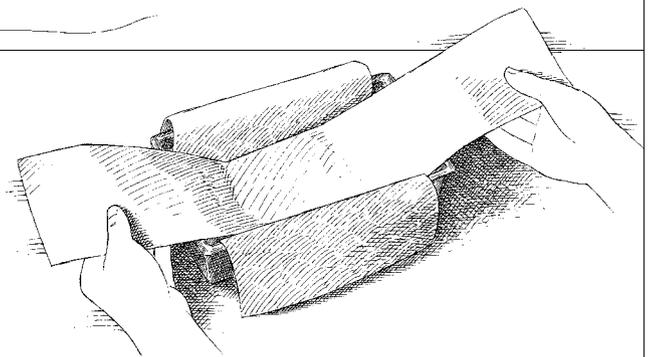
Parchment paper is an extremely useful baker's tool. It can be used to line round, loaf, or rectangular baking pans for an effortless release; to line baking sheets and jelly-roll pans; and to make rolling out doughs easier.

Do not use waxed paper in place of parchment paper except in instances where it will not be exposed to the direct heat of the oven. Used to line the bottom of a cake pan, waxed paper is fine, but if used on a cookie sheet, the wax coating will melt.



Lining a Cake Pan

Trace the bottom of your cake pan roughly in the center of a sheet of parchment paper. Cut just inside the outline of the circle. The resulting round of parchment should fit neatly in the cake pan.



Lining a Baking Pan for Quick Breads or Brownies

Make a sling by placing a strip of parchment paper across the length and width of the pan so that the paper overlaps the edges. Fill the pan with batter and bake. Use the parchment to transfer the cooled baked good to a cutting board.

A Word about Glass Baking Dishes

Glass is an excellent insulator of heat. It is for this reason that some sources recommend reducing the oven temperature by 25 degrees whenever baking in a glass baking dish. In the test kitchen, we do not abide by this suggestion. When baking in glass, we have indeed experienced greater depth of browning, but never to an unacceptable extent. In fact, we prefer both the flavor and the texture that result from a greater degree of browning.

Warming Butter and Eggs Quickly

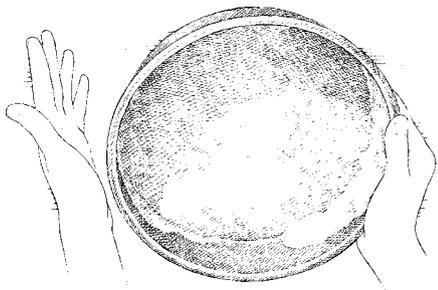
If you can't wait an hour for butter and eggs to come to room temperature on their own, here's what to do.



Cut butter into 1-tablespoon pieces and then place in a bowl wrapped in a warm damp kitchen towel. Alternatively, place on a plate and microwave at 10 percent power for 1 minute, test, and continue to microwave as needed. Eggs are even easier to warm—just put whole eggs in a small bowl of warm water (about 110 degrees) for about 5 minutes.

GREASING AND FLOURING PANS

If a recipe directs you to grease a baking pan, do so in advance of preparing the batter (batters can lose some leavening if left to stand) and do so whether or not the pan is nonstick. Butter, shortening, and nonstick cooking spray all work well. Flour provides an added layer of protection against sticking and makes for an easy and clean release.

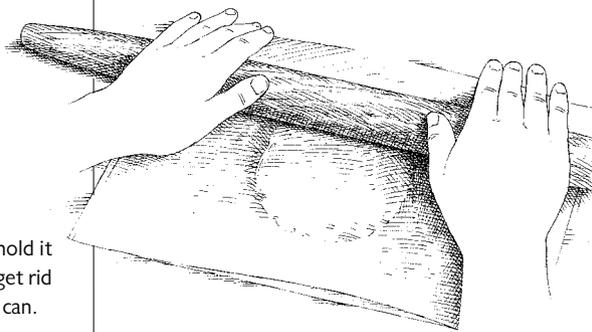


Dusting a Pan with Flour

After greasing the pan, give it a liberal sprinkling of flour, then hold it up and tap and rotate it so that the flour coats all surfaces. To get rid of excess flour, rap the pan upside down over a sink or garbage can.

ROLLING

Although dough can be rolled out on a floured work surface, we prefer to sandwich it between two large sheets of plastic wrap or parchment paper. Starting at the center of the disk, roll away from you, then spin the dough a quarter turn and again, starting at the center, roll away from you. Apply pressure evenly to the rolling pin and chill the dough if it becomes too soft and sticky.



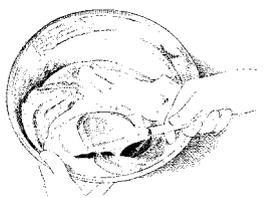
FOLDING

Folding is used to mix delicate batters and mixtures; the aim is to incorporate ingredients or components without causing deflation. Folding is required, for example, when incorporating beaten egg whites into a soufflé base. The usual tool for folding is a large, flexible rubber spatula. An adequately large bowl is

also important. Begin by gently stirring about a quarter of the lighter mixture into the heavier mixture until almost fully incorporated. This lightens and loosens the heavier mixture. Scrape the remaining mixture onto the lightened mixture and now you are ready to start folding.



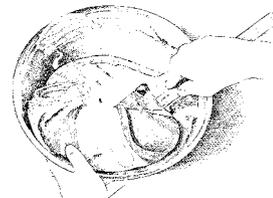
1. Cut through the center of the two mixtures down to the bottom of the bowl.



2. Pull the spatula toward you, scraping along the bottom and up the side of the bowl.

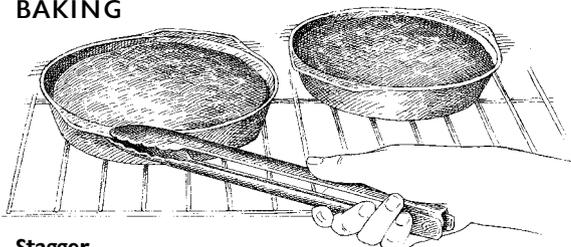


3. Once the spatula is out of the mixture, rotate it so any mixture clinging to the blade falls back onto the surface.



4. Spin the bowl a quarter turn and repeat until mixture is just incorporated.

BAKING



Stagger

When baking more than one cake pan at the same time, allow for some space between the pans and between the pans and the oven walls. Also, stagger their placement in the oven so that air can circulate and the cakes will bake evenly.

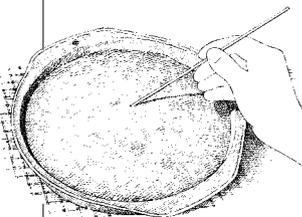
Rotate

Even calibrated ovens have hot and cool spots, with temperatures falling within a 50-degree range. Cookies, pies, tarts, and all but the most delicate cakes should be rotated during baking to achieve even browning and baking. The halfway point or shortly thereafter is generally a good time to rotate. If you have one pan on the bottom rack and another on the top, switch their positions and, in addition, turn each one 180 degrees.

TESTING FOR DONENESS

For Pies and Pastry

Doneness is usually gauged by color. Baked only until pale blond, pastry is less than crisp and has a floury taste. When baked until a deep nut-brown—which is our preference—the flavor is fuller and the texture is crisp and flaky.



For Cakes, Muffins, and Quick Breads

A cake tester or skewer inserted into the center of the item should come out clean. If batter clings to the tester or skewer, the baked good needs more time in the oven. Fully baked, cakes, muffins, and quick breads will feel springy and resilient when the center is gently pressed with fingers. If an impression is left in the surface, the item is not done.



EQUIPMENT:

A Baker's Best Tools

Having the right equipment is half the battle when baking. Based on the results of past equipment tests and years of use in the test kitchen, here are our preferred pieces of bakeware and equipment.

LOAF PAN

Baker's Secret Non-Stick, large

➤ Browns and releases baked goods flawlessly. Handles make it easy to maneuver.

CAKE PAN

Baker's Secret Non-Stick, round

➤ Has handles that make it easy to manipulate. Browns well, and cakes release easily.

SPRINGFORM PAN

Kaiser Bakeware Noblesse

➤ Easy to assemble and has a rimless bottom that makes cake removal easy.

PIE PLATE

Corning Pyrex Originals, glass

➤ Browns and crisps better than metal.

COOKIE SHEET

Kaiser Cookie Sheet

➤ An extended edge makes grasping the cookie sheet easy. It browns well, too.

RUBBER SPATULA

Le Creuset Heatproof 12½-Inch

➤ Excels at folding and at both light and heavy scraping. Highly stain-resistant.

ROLLING PIN

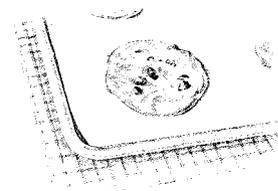
Tapered French rolling pin

➤ Svelte size makes it maneuverable and allows for a good feel for dough thickness.

OVEN THERMOMETER

Taylor Classic Oven Guide

➤ Sits stably. Accurate and easy to read.



For Cookies

For a soft, chewy texture, cookies are best removed from the oven when they appear to be a bit underbaked. Cooling the sheet of cookies for a few minutes on a rack allows them to set slightly.