

Measuring 101: Techniques & Shortcuts

Accurate measuring is the first step to successful cooking. We define the basics, show you some shortcuts, and explain why careful measuring is so important. BY RAQUEL PELZEL

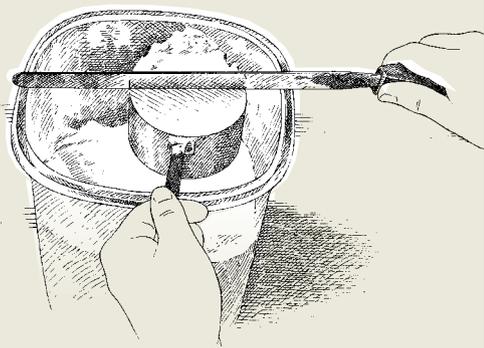
Proper measuring can make or break a recipe. Take flour, for example. In baked goods such as cakes, cookies, and breads, adding too little flour can make the end product flat, wet, or lacking in structure. Many home cooks measure flour by spooning it into a cup, then leveling it off. This method of measuring dry ingredients

can yield 20 percent less flour than the method we use in the test kitchen: dip and sweep (illustrated below, at left). In helping you to measure accurately, the tips and techniques we present here will help you achieve consistently good results whenever you cook or bake.

DRY OR LIQUID MEASURING CUP—WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Dry ingredients like flour and sugar should always be measured in dry measuring cups, never in liquid cups. Although liquid and dry measuring cups hold the same volume, in a liquid measuring cup, there is no way to level the surface of the contents to obtain an exact measurement.

While it is possible to measure liquids in a dry measuring cup, it's hard to fill the cup to the rim and decant it without spills. A liquid measuring cup has headroom so that it needn't be filled to the brim.



DRY MEASURING (DIP AND SWEEP) Dip a dry measuring cup into the ingredient and sweep away the excess with a straight-edged object such as an icing spatula.



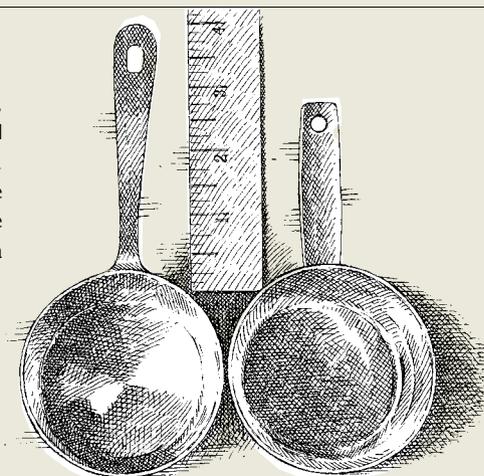
LIQUID MEASURING To get an accurate reading in a liquid measuring cup, set the cup on a level surface and bend down to read it at eye level. Read the measurement at the bottom of the concave arc at the liquid's surface, known as the meniscus line.

DRY MEASURING CUPS

The Good, the Bad, and the Useless

For both measuring spoons and dry measuring cups, we prefer heavy, well-constructed stainless steel models with long, sturdy, well-designed handles. Plastic spoons and cups feel flimsy, have rims prone to developing nicks and bumps, can warp in the dishwasher, and will melt if placed too close to a heat source.

OUR FAVORITE An extra-long 4-inch handle makes dipping into a bin of flour a clean endeavor.

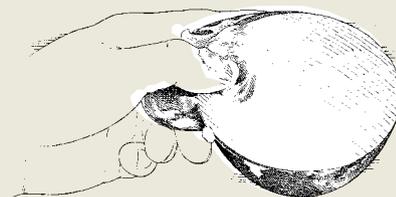


Three Problematic Handle Styles



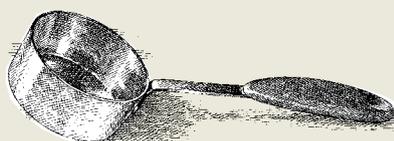
short handle

STICKY FINGERS The short, awkward handle on this cup makes dipping and sweeping difficult. It can also be hard to keep your thumb out of the ingredients.



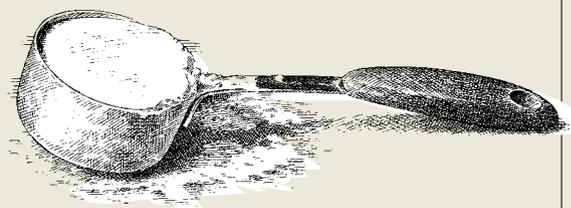
flexible handle

NO BACKBONE This flimsy, flexible handle bends under the slightest pressure.



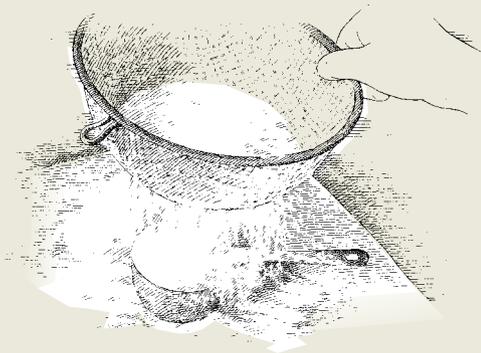
heavy handle

TOPSY-TURVY This handle-heavy cup tilts when set down, increasing the chance that ingredients will spill out.

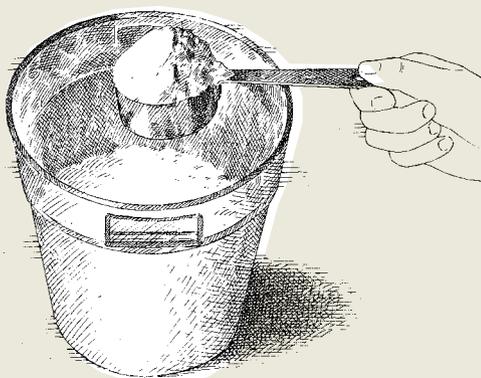


WHY AND HOW TO SIFT FLOUR

When a recipe calls for sifted flour, it is important to take the time to sift even if the flour you're using is labeled "presifted." In addition to eliminating lumps, sifting aerates the flour, making it easier to incorporate the flour into a batter. Sifted flour thus also weighs 20 to 25 percent less per cup than unsifted. We found that an additional ounce of flour caused an otherwise moist and perfectly level cake to bake up into a drier cake with a domed top.



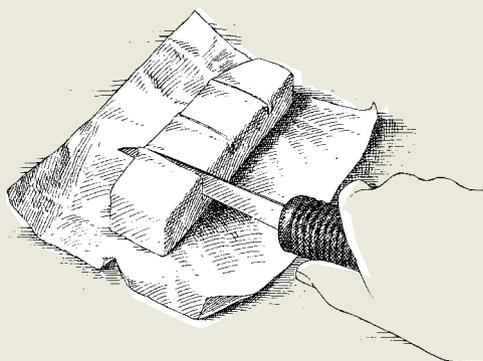
SIFT AND LEVEL If a recipe reads "1 cup sifted flour," sift the flour directly into a measuring cup (set on top of parchment paper for a hassle-free cleanup) and level off the cup.



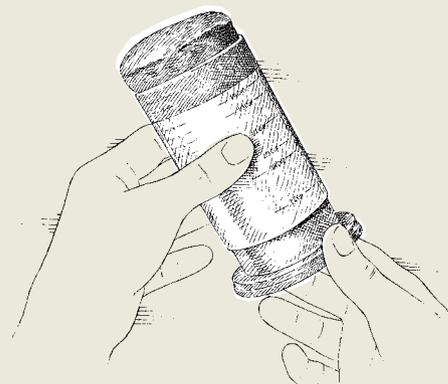
DIP, SWEEP, AND SIFT If a recipe reads "1 cup flour, sifted," first dip into the flour and sweep off the excess, then sift it onto a piece of parchment paper. This method yields the same amount of flour by weight as if you had simply dipped and swept, but the flour is now aerated and lump free.

MEASURING TIPS AND SHORTCUTS

Here are some ideas to help you deal with hard-to-measure ingredients.



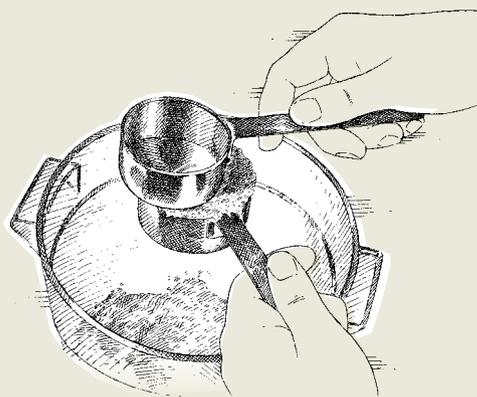
MEASURING BUTTER ACCURATELY We've noticed that the tablespoon increment measures on butter wrappers often don't line up correctly with the stick of butter. If this is the case, unwrap the butter, mark the halfway point in the stick and then mark the midpoint of each half, dividing the stick into quarters (each quarter is equal to 2 tablespoons, or 1 ounce). If necessary, mark the midpoint of each quarter, dividing the stick into eighths (each eighth is equal to 1 tablespoon, or 1/2 ounce). Alternatively, use a scale to weigh the butter, keeping in mind that 1 tablespoon equals 1/2 ounce.



MEASURING PEANUT BUTTER Great for measuring semisolid ingredients like sour cream and peanut butter, this push-up-style cup allows you to scoop in the ingredient, level it off, and then push it right out. (For buying information, see Resources, page 32.)



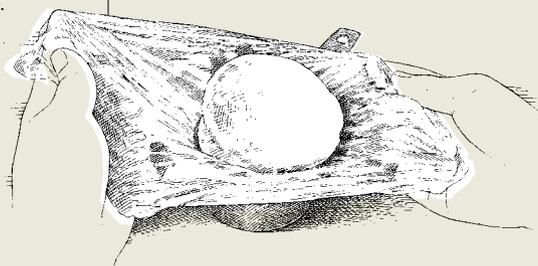
HANDLING HONEY AND MOLASSES When measuring sticky ingredients like honey and molasses, spray the measuring cup with nonstick cooking spray before filling it. When emptied, the liquid will slip right out of the cup.



PACKING BROWN SUGAR Brown sugar is tacky and lumpy; packing it into a measuring cup compacts the sugar and presses out any air pockets (the difference in weight between 1 cup of packed brown sugar and 1 cup of unpacked can be as much as 2 ounces). A neat way to pack brown sugar is to use the bottom of a smaller cup to tamp and press the sugar into a larger cup.

MEASURING FLOUR, SIMPLIFIED

| Recipe reads: | then you: | to get a weight of: |
|---|--|--------------------------------------|
| ➤ 1 cup all-purpose flour ➤ 1 cup cake flour | measure flour with dip-and-sweep method | ➤ about 5 ounces ➤ about 4 ounces |
| ➤ 1 cup sifted all-purpose flour ➤ 1 cup sifted cake flour | sift flour directly into measuring cup and level off | ➤ about 4 ounces ➤ about 3 ounces |
| ➤ 1 cup all-purpose flour, sifted ➤ 1 cup cake flour, sifted | measure flour with dip-and-sweep method, then sift | ➤ about 5 ounces ➤ about 4 ounces |



MEASURING SHORTENING When measuring messy, malleable ingredients like shortening, line the measuring cup with plastic wrap, scoop in the shortening, and level it off. To retrieve it, simply lift out the plastic liner and the contents come with it. ILLUSTRATION: JOHN BURGOPYNE