

# Avoiding Mixing Mix-Ups

The majority of baking recipes are written with an underlying assumption that the reader is well-versed in basic mixing techniques. But most of us learned cooking informally, which often means that we learned some things wrong or picked up bad habits along the way. Through tests and trials, we here at *Cook's* have

learned quite a lot about how far awry a recipe can go with just one false step in the mixing process. Cakes, we found, are perfect examples of this principle. Though these two pages focus on tips and techniques for mixing cake batter, much of the information here can be applied to all kinds of baking recipes.

## CREAMING

Most butter cake recipes begin by creaming butter. Butter must be creamed so that it can coat the flour and prevent gluten from forming, thus producing a tender cake. In addition, creaming incorporates air into the butter, which is essential for leavening. Correctly creamed butter will create a light, airy cake.

### Is Your Butter Soft Enough?

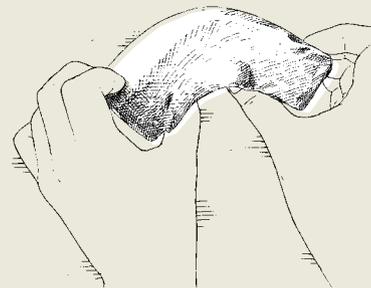
To cream, butter must be brought to a cool room temperature (about 67 degrees Fahrenheit) so that it is malleable but not soft. This is called "the plastic stage," and it is the condition in which the butter will best hold air and be stable. Following are three clues to help you tell if your butter is at the right stage for creaming.



The butter should give slightly when pressed but still hold its shape.

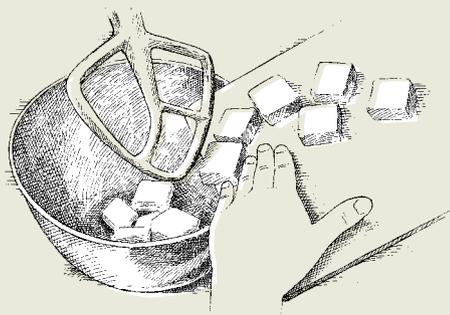


When you unwrap the butter before creaming, the wrapping should have a creamy residue on the inside.

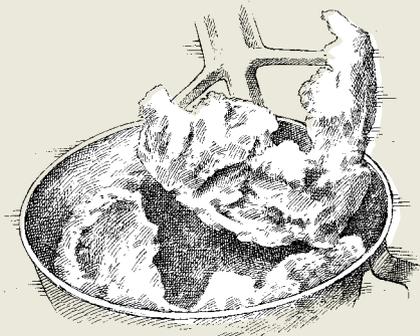


The butter should bend with little resistance and without cracking or breaking.

### Creaming Tips



It can take a long time for a stick of chilled butter to reach the right temperature for creaming. If you are in a hurry, you can speed up the softening process by cutting the butter into tablespoon-sized pieces. We found that it will soften to the right stage in about 15 minutes.



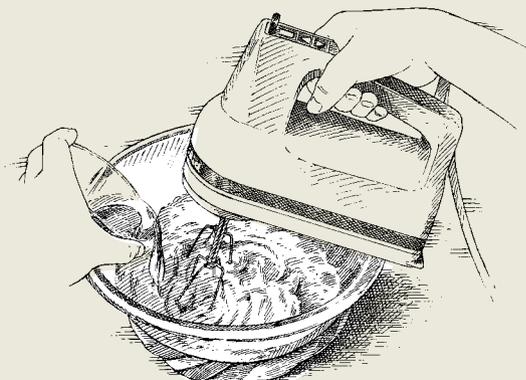
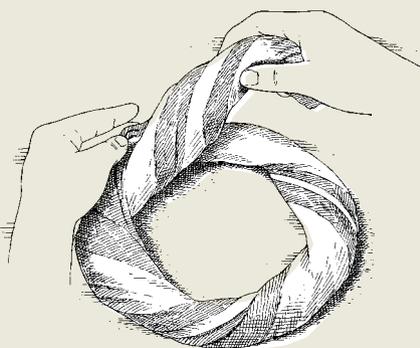
If your butter is too cool when creamed, it will look shiny and granular after adding sugar and will not aerate properly. If creamed at the proper temperature, the butter and sugar mixture will look thick, dull, and smooth.



If, despite all precautions, your butter is still too cool, a quick remedy is to wrap bowl in a warm damp towel and continue creaming.

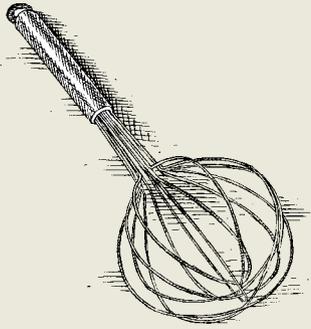
Cake recipes typically call for adding wet and dry ingredients alternately for even blending. If you're using a handheld mixer, twist a damp towel (right) and form a turban nest for the bowl, thus securing it in place so that you may proceed with mixing.

Adding eggs to creamed butter deflates it a bit. For this reason, it is important to add room temperature eggs one at a time (far right) and cream until each is completely incorporated and the butter has returned to a light, fluffy state.

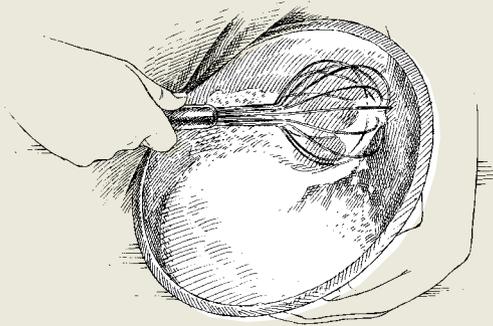


## WHIPPING

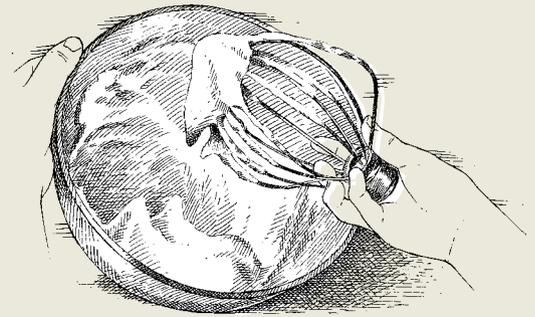
Recipes for sponge and angel food cakes use whipped egg whites to aerate and leaven their batters. If you are using a handheld or standing mixer to whip, begin on low speed and beat whites until foamy, gradually increasing speed to medium high.



We tried whipping egg whites with a number of whisk types. This peculiarly shaped balloon whisk by Rösle was the hands-down winner. If you hand-whip egg whites often, this whisk is definitely worth having (*see* Resources, page 32).



To hand-whip efficiently, hug the bowl at an angle between your arm and rib cage. Make sure to move the whisk in a circular motion in order to sweep air into the whites. This movement does not need to be fast.

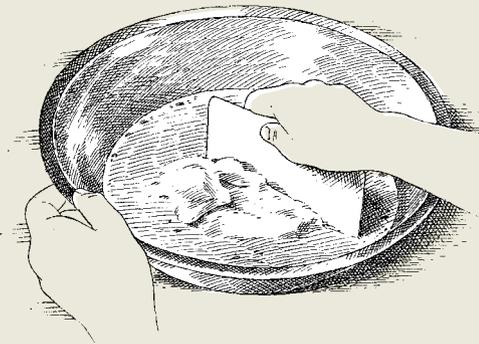


If using a standing mixer to whip egg whites, turn mixer off just shy of proper consistency. Detach whisk attachment and bowl and whisk the last few strokes by hand. Be sure to scrape along the bottom where the beaters may not have reached.

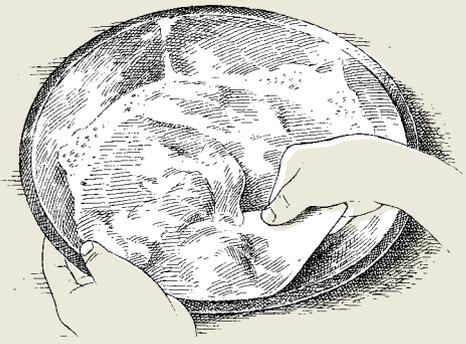
## FOLDING

It is important to use a light but quick hand when folding whipped ingredients so that you do not deflate the batter. We tested a number of utensils for folding (including bare hands). While a large flat spatula (about 2<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches) works very well, the best tool is a flexible dough scraper (below, right). This tool is particularly helpful with foamy batters, such as sponge cakes. Begin folding immediately after whipping egg whites to prevent them from deflating.

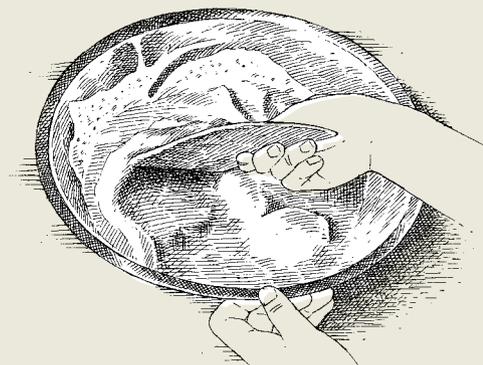
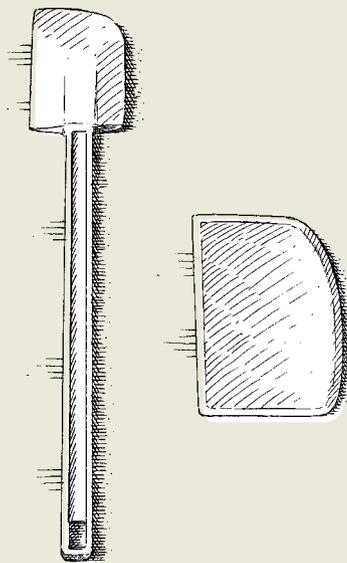
Folding comes down to four quick motions. For stiff batter recipes, whisk one third of the whipped whites into the batter and then fold in the rest using the following steps:



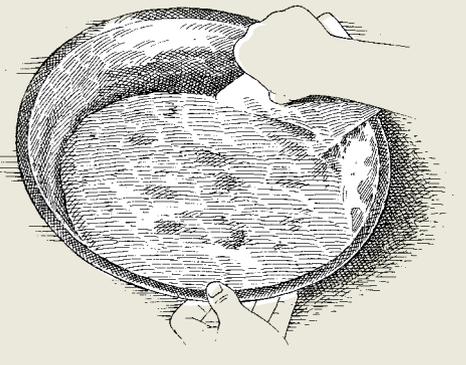
**1.** Place the whipped whites on top of the batter and cut through the middle of the bowl with the curved edge of a flexible dough scraper.



**2.** Holding the dough scraper flat against the bowl, scoop along the bottom, then slide up the side of the bowl. Simultaneously begin turning the bowl a third of the way around, counterclockwise.



**3.** Lift up and allow the batter to fall toward the center. Repeat Steps 1 through 3 twice, until egg whites are just incorporated and no white streaks remain.



**4.** Sweep once around the bowl to incorporate any residual batter that may have clung to the sides.

Illustration: John Burgoyne