



101

ESSENTIAL TIPS

Baking



Breaks down the subject into 101 easy-to-grasp tips

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Caroline Bretherton





Penguin
Random
House

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THE BASICS

1

READ THE RECIPE FIRST

It is easy to get carried away by the baking impulse when you see the tempting image of a luscious cake in a magazine or recipe book. However, it is vital to read a recipe all the way through before you start. The main questions to ask yourself are: "Do I have all the ingredients?" and "Do I have time to make this?"



Read through a recipe before you start

2

ROOM-TEMPERATURE EGGS

Using room-temperature eggs, even when the recipe does not specifically call for them, is particularly important when you need volume in a cake or dessert. This is because room-temperature eggs can be whisked more easily, resulting in a light, airy texture.



Take the eggs out of the refrigerator in advance

3

SOFTENED BUTTER

Baking recipes often call for softened or room-temperature butter. When this is the case, take the butter out of the refrigerator at least 30 minutes before you start baking. Softened butter creams more easily with sugar, creating a light, fluffy texture with little effort.



Cut the butter into small squares to soften it



4

BUTTER OR MARGARINE?

Both butter and margarine have their place in baking—and their advocates. It is not always easy to tell the difference between a cake that has been made with butter and another made with margarine. Generally speaking, however, butter gives a richer finish to pastry, whereas margarine will give cakes a lighter, more airy texture.

*Margarine
mixes animal and
vegetable oils*

**THE SOFT OPTION**

One of the advantages of using margarine over butter is that you do not have to wait until it has softened before working it into the other ingredients.

5

**TOAST SPICES
TO RELEASE
THE FLAVORS**

Using freshly ground spices in a recipe adds a depth of flavor that is hard to beat. If you are using fresh, whole spices, take the time to toast them first. Sprinkle the spices in an even layer in a dry frying pan, and cook them over a low to medium heat for a couple of minutes, or until they start to change color and release their fragrance. Allow the spices to cool before grinding them.

KEEP AN EYE ON THE PAN

When you toast the spices, make sure they do not cook too quickly. If they burn, they will produce an unpleasant, acrid flavor.



6

BAKING SODA OR BAKING POWDER?

These two baking staples often get confused. However, they are not the same thing, so it is useful to know which product is most suitable in which circumstances. The main thing to remember is that baking soda needs an acid to activate it, whereas baking powder has had the acid already added to it.

**BAKING SODA**

Baking soda can be used in any recipe where an acid is present to activate it—most commonly, lemon juice or buttermilk.



Baking powder is baking soda with added acid, usually cream of tartar

BAKING POWDER

Baking powder is typically used in all kinds of baked goods where no other acid is present—for example, vanilla cakes.

7

GET THE SHELVES RIGHT

A good recipe should tell you where to position your oven shelves. Do not overlook this seemingly minor aspect—it is of the utmost importance to the overall success of the cake. Position the shelf before you heat the oven because hot shelves require careful handling, and time spent juggling them will inevitably result in considerable loss of heat.

SHELF POSITION IS IMPORTANT

Moving the oven shelves before you start baking is not only safer but is more likely to result in the correct oven temperature.





8

DON'T OPEN THE OVEN!

It is tempting, when baking, to take a peek inside the oven to see how things are progressing. However, opening the oven door results in a sudden drop of temperature that can have serious consequences for your cake. A good rule of thumb is never to open the oven door until at least three-quarters of the cooking time allowed for in the recipe has elapsed.

BE PATIENT

Opening the oven too early will result in loss of heat and a slower baking time, and it may cause delicate baked goods to drop.

9

OVEN THERMOMETERS

The temperature dial on your oven may give only an approximate reading. Since the temperature inside the oven is such a vital element of a successful cake, it is worth investing in an accurate oven thermometer. You can leave it in the oven to double-check that the temperature on your dial matches the temperature inside, or use it to check and calibrate the oven's temperature every so often.

Hook to attach
to oven shelf



ACCURATE READING

The loss of heat resulting from opening the oven door takes a few seconds to register. Read the temperature through the glass, if possible.

10

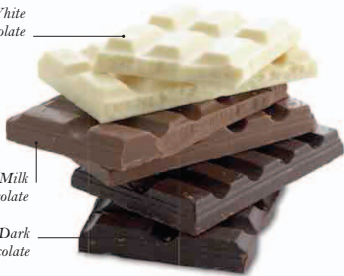
BAKING WITH CHOCOLATE

If you are baking with chocolate, it is worth buying the best-quality chocolate you can afford. If you are using dark chocolate, try to find one with a cocoa-solid content of at least 70 percent. A high cocoa-solid percentage will result in an intense, chocolatey taste rather than a cloyingly sweet one.

White chocolate

Milk chocolate

Dark chocolate

**MELTING CHOCOLATE**

A microwave is a good shortcut for melting chocolate, but the higher cocoa-solid content it has, the more likely it is to burn. Instead, melt it in a bain-marie—that is, in a glass bowl over a little gently simmering water.

11

FLOATING TEST FOR EGG FRESHNESS

Unless they come with an individual date stamp, sooner or later we all end up with eggs of questionable freshness in the refrigerator. Before using them in your cake, make sure the eggs are still good to eat by putting them through this simple test.

FRESHNESS TEST

Gently place the egg in a glass of cold water to test its freshness. The water must be deep enough for the egg to either sink or float.

Floating egg is no longer fresh

Egg that sinks to bottom is fresh





12

**MEASURING
STICKY
INGREDIENTS**

If your recipe calls for a sticky ingredient, such as honey or syrup, measuring can be a messy business. However, there is a trick to ensure that things stay tidy in the kitchen. Simply spray your measuring utensil with a thin layer of baking spray before using. This will help the ingredients slide off easily.

WARM & STICKY

It is easier to deal with slightly warmed honey or syrup than cold. Before measuring out these ingredients, heat the container under a hot tap for a few seconds.

13

**DIGITAL
SCALES**

Digital scales are an essential piece of equipment for any serious baker. Most have a zeroing, or tare, function, which enables you to measure out several different ingredients into the same bowl. The accuracy of digital scales is such that it is possible to measure out even the smallest amounts.

METRIC OR IMPERIAL?

Good-quality digital scales operate both metric and imperial systems, which eliminates the need to convert grams into ounces and vice versa.



14

UNSALTED BUTTER FOR EVERYTHING

Some recipes may call for both unsalted butter and salt. If you come across this instruction, do not try to save time by using salted butter. Unsalted butter is a better option when it comes to baking, and it is far better to control the amount of salt in the recipe by adding it yourself.



CHOOSING THE RIGHT SALT

Different salts taste different. Naturally produced flaky sea salt has a delicate, slightly sweet flavor that is complementary to most sweet baked goods.

15

USING VANILLA BEANS

Vanilla beans are an expensive, but sometimes essential, luxury when it comes to fine baking. If you do invest in them, it makes sense to maximize their use. After you have scraped out the seeds, the part that is more commonly required in baking, put the empty beans to good use, too.



Vanilla beans



SUGAR STORAGE

After scraping out the seeds, store the pod in a jar of granulated sugar to give it a gentle vanilla flavor.



FLAVORED MILK

To refresh a used vanilla pod, place it in a pan of milk and gently heat it up. Not only will this give the pod a new lease on life but it will result in delicately flavored milk.



16

**GRINDING
NUTS FOR
RECIPES**

Freshly ground whole nuts yield a more intense nutty flavor than store-bought ones. Beware of the method you use, though. The best thing to do is to pulse the nuts in a food processor gradually, until you achieve the desired consistency. Grinding them too quickly will release the oils in the nuts, resulting in a greasy paste.

**NUTTY CRUMBS**

Grinding your own nuts allows you to control the finished texture, making them perfect for decorating either cakes or cupcakes.

GRIND YOUR OWN

Walnuts, hazelnuts, pistachios, macadamia nuts—you can grind all types of nuts and use them in baking.

17

**HOW TO SLICE A
CAKE PERFECTLY**

Slicing a frosted cake neatly can be a challenge. For perfect results every time, try the following method. Have a cup of hot water ready, and dip your knife into it to heat it slightly. Wipe it dry with a paper towel, then slice the cake. Wipe any crumbs off the knife and repeat the process for each slice.

THE PERFECT SLICE

Presentation—of both the entire cake and the individual slices—is important, especially after all the effort you have put into baking it.



18

WHAT IF? NO PARCHMENT PAPER

Sometimes a recipe might instruct you to line a baking pan with parchment paper. If you do not have any in the house, there is a quick fix. Use good-quality aluminum foil instead, either lightly sprayed with baking spray or brushed with melted butter or an unflavored oil.



Aluminum foil

BETTER CONDUCTOR

Be aware that aluminum foil will heat faster and retain heat better than parchment paper. Adjust cooking times accordingly.



Baking spray

19

WHAT IF? NO BUTTERMILK

Buttermilk is more readily available in some locations than others. If this product is hard to find in your local supermarket, it is easy enough to make your own. Simply mix 1 tbsp fresh lemon juice or white vinegar into 8fl oz (250ml) milk. Leave it for a few minutes, until it has curdled and thickened slightly, then use it as you would use buttermilk.



*Milk will curdle
with addition
of acid*



ADDING ACIDIC CONTENT

Fresh lemon juice is the simplest addition, but white vinegar or rice wine vinegar can also be used, if you have either on hand.



20

WHAT IF? NO BAKING POWDER

As annoying as it is to realize that you have run out of an important ingredient when you want to bake, it is often possible to improvise an alternative. Such is the case with baking powder. If you find yourself without any in the cabinet, combine $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp cream of tartar with $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp baking soda. This mix can be used as a substitute for 1 tsp baking powder.



Baking soda and cream of tartar



Baking powder

21

WHAT IF? NO SELF- RISING FLOUR

If you should find yourself without any self-rising flour, here is a handy substitution: simply whisk together 1 cup ($4\frac{1}{2}$ oz/125g) all-purpose flour with $1\frac{1}{2}$ tsp baking powder.



Baking
powder

All-purpose flour



BEWARE SALT CONTENT

In some countries, self-rising flour already contains salt. If you wish, you can add $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp salt per cup of flour.



COOKIES, BARS & SMALL CAKES

22

LET COOKIES SET

It is tempting to eat home-baked cookies the moment they come out of the oven, but it is a better idea to wait. Let them settle on their sheets for a couple of minutes before removing them to a wire rack to cool completely. When they are hot, cookies are fragile and can break easily. Plus, if you let them cool, you will not burn your mouth when you eat them!



TIME TO REST

Letting cookies rest before moving them to a cooling rack allows them to set and makes them less likely to break.



23

PERFECT BROWNIES

Some people enjoy brownies that are very moist in the center, while others prefer a firmer bake. This difference in consistency depends on the cooking time, so feel free to experiment until you achieve your preferred result.

GOOEY CENTER

Add 1 tbsp Greek yogurt or sour cream to the mix for an even moister brownie.

24

ACHIEVING EVEN BROWNNES

Some ovens are hotter on one side than the other. Test the temperature with an oven thermometer (see Tip 9). If you find that this is the case with your oven, you can still ensure a perfectly even brownness on a batch of cookies by rotating the baking sheet halfway through the cooking time.



25

FREEZING COOKIE DOUGH FOR LATER USE

If you like your cookies freshly baked but do not always have time to prepare them, consider making twice as much dough and freezing it. Scoop the extra dough, separated slightly, onto a baking sheet, then open freeze it. Once frozen, transfer the dough portions to a freezer bag. When you need extra cookies, just place them on a baking sheet and bake for a couple of extra minutes, straight from frozen.

**HANDY BACKUP**

Having a bag of pre-portioned cookie dough in the freezer is very convenient when friends or family drop by unexpectedly.

26

HEAVY BAKING SHEETS AT HOT TEMPERATURES

Good-quality heavy baking sheets and pans are essential when baking at high temperatures. A good sheet distributes heat uniformly, ensuring an even cake, whereas a cheaper one may brown the outside of a cake before it is cooked through. The same is true with the undersides of cookies and cookies. In addition, a good-quality sheet will not warp in high heat.

**PAYING FOR QUALITY**

It is well worth investing in good-quality nonstick baking pans—they will produce consistently good results for years to come.



27

USING A LUMPY MIX FOR MUFFINS

Muffins are among a small number of baked goods where less beating achieves better results. Muffin batter should be mixed together only until the wet and dry ingredients are just combined. The mixture ought to look a little lumpy. If it is overworked and appears smooth, the muffins will have a dense, rubbery texture.

HAND MIXING IS BEST

Gentle mixing by hand will give you more control over the finished result and make it easier to avoid overmixing.

28

A TIP FOR FILLING LINERS FOR CUPCAKES

Cupcakes should be beautifully uniform in size, risen perfectly just above the rims of the papers. To achieve this result, use an ice cream scoop or large cookie scoop to portion out the batter evenly, and do not fill the papers to the brim. This will also help you avoid dripping the batter on the edges of the papers.

29

USING COOKING SPRAY FOR EASY PORTIONING

Some cake batters and cookie doughs are sticky and difficult to portion out neatly, even using an ice cream scoop. Try spraying the scoop lightly with baking spray first. This helps the batter slide out easily in one go. Wipe the scoop with a paper towel and spray again if needed.



Ice cream scoop with release

**30**

REMOVE CUPCAKES FROM THE PAN IMMEDIATELY

It is common practice to let a large cake set in its pan for a few minutes after removing it from the oven. However, smaller cakes, such as cupcakes, can continue to cook if left in a hot pan. This is why it is advisable to remove them as soon as possible, taking great care not to burn your fingers. Leave on a wire rack to cool.



EASY REMOVAL

When lifting cupcakes out of a hot pan, gently tug at both sides of the paper at the same time for an even, mess-free removal.



31

FILLING EMPTY PANS WITH WATER

There may be times when, even though you are following a recipe, you might end up not using every space in a 12-hole muffin pan. Before baking, carefully fill the empty spaces half

full of water. This will help distribute the heat and allow the other cakes to bake more evenly.



Pour water into empty spaces

WATER WITH CARE

Using a liquid measuring cup, pour the water until halfway up the sides of the pans before gently sliding the tray into the oven.



32

A SOFT TOP FOR MUFFINS

Muffins bake at quite a high temperature, and

it is not uncommon to find that the tops are a little overcooked by the time the inside is done. A simple trick to rectify this is to cover the muffins with a clean, dry dish towel while they cool. The resulting steam will soften the tops slightly, making them perfectly moist.



DISH TOWEL TRICK

This trick works best with simple muffins; those with a crunchy streusel topping (see Tip 53) should always be left uncovered.



33

**CUTTING
SCONES
STRAIGHT
DOWN**

When cutting out scones or biscuits, do not be tempted to twist the cutter slightly to release them. This action will cause the edges to bind together, leading to the scones rising unevenly. A straight up-and-down cutting motion is needed for a perfectly risen result.

SHARP METAL CUTTERS

Round metal cutters are preferable to plastic ones, since they give a far sharper result and will last for years.



34

**MOISTENING MUFFINS WITH
GRATED APPLE OR PEAR**

Muffins have a reputation for being delicious straight out of the oven, but they tend to taste dry and stale within only a couple of days. To keep them moister for longer, try adding some grated apple or pear, or even a little mashed banana, to the mix.

**ADDED MOISTURE**

A single apple, peeled and grated, can be added to almost any muffin mix to produce a moister, longer-lasting muffin.

**ADDED TEXTURE**

Small pieces of diced fruit added to the mix will give your muffins extra texture, as well as increase their moisture.

EVERYDAY & CELEBRATION CAKES

35

PAN SIZE

Using the correct-sized pan is of the utmost importance when

baking. The depth of the batter will impact a cake's cooking time, so be sure to measure the pans before you start.



Use different pans for different baking purposes

36

GREASING & LINING PANS

To prevent your baked goods from sticking to the bottom and sides of the pans they are baked in, grease the pans or line them with waxed or parchment paper. It is wise to do this even with nonstick pans. This could save your cake from having to be cut out of the pan in multiple pieces.



Rub pan with butter



Brush pan with melted butter



Dust off excess flour



Line pan with greaseproof paper

BUTTER & FLOUR

Rub the inside of the pan with butter, then sprinkle it with flour. Allow the flour to reach every corner, then shake off the excess.

BUTTER & PAPER

After brushing the inside of the pan with a little melted butter, line the bottom and sides with cut-to-size parchment paper.



37

GREASING DECORATIVE CAKE PANS

The best way to grease decorative cake pans is with baking spray, or with melted butter and a pastry brush, to make sure you get into every corner. Sprinkle the greased pan with a little flour, then tip out any excess for a truly foolproof result.



Get into every groove of pan



Perfect end result

38

LETTING CAKES SETTLE IN PANS

When you take a cake out of the oven, allow it to sit in the pan for at least 10 minutes before turning it out onto a cooling rack to cool completely. The timing is of critical importance: turn the cake out immediately, and it will likely stick to the pan; leave it too long, and it will become dense.

39

DUSTING WITH COCOA FOR CHOCOLATE CAKES

Dusting a cake pan with flour (see Tip 36) is mostly a good idea, but it does not work well with chocolate cake, since it can lead to a less than perfect result, with specks of white flour on the outside. Try dusting the pan with a little unsweetened cocoa powder instead.

40

PROCESSING SUGAR WITH FRUIT ZEST

Citrus zest can be added to most recipes. The best way to maximize the burst of citrusy flavor zest brings is by mixing it in a food processor with the sugar before creaming.



ZESTING TOOLS

Invest in a zesting tool that you can use exclusively for citrus fruit; however, at a pinch, you can use a cheese grater.

41

BAKING WITH DRIED FRUIT

When baking a fruitcake, the batter should be thick enough to keep the dried fruit from sinking to the bottom. If your batter is not quite right, however, there is a simple trick you can use: lightly toss the dried fruit in a little flour before incorporating it into the batter.



FLOURY COAT

Remove a couple of tablespoons of the measured flour and use them to lightly coat the dried fruit before mixing it into the batter.

42

USING A BALLOON WHISK FOR DRY INGREDIENTS

Some recipes call for sifting, a simple procedure that separates any coarse elements in a dry mix, therefore ensuring the lightest possible end result. However, if time is at a premium or if you do not have a sieve, you can produce a similar (and less messy) effect by whisking together dry goods in a large bowl with a balloon whisk.



QUICK & EASY

Whisk together the dry ingredients needed for your baking to replicate a sifting effect.



CUTTING THE RIGHT SHAPE

Take out the bottom of the pan and use it as a template to cut two disks of parchment paper that will fit neatly into the pan.

43

DOUBLE-LINING PANS FOR LARGE FRUITCAKES

A large fruitcake is a dense thing, and it takes a long time to cook all the way through. This is partly because it must bake at a low temperature to prevent the fruit from burning and losing its sweetness. It is possible to prevent the outside of the cake from cooking or over-browning before the inside is set by using a heavy pan and double-lining it with parchment paper.



44

TESTING FOR DONENESS

Depending on the oven, the time it takes to bake a cake can vary considerably. The main thing to bear in mind is not to check too soon, or the cake will drop. Open the oven only after at least three-quarters of the cooking time have passed. A cake with a cooking time of 25 minutes, for example, can be checked after 20 minutes.

**DONE TO THE TOUCH**

When a cake is cooked, it should have an even light-brown color. It should also spring back when gently pressed in the center.

**CHECK THE INSIDE**

A metal skewer inserted into the center of a cake should come out clean, with only a little moisture on it.



45

CUTTING HORIZONTALLY FOR LAYERS

Cutting a cake horizontally to create the elements for a layer cake can be tricky. The important thing is to get an even result, so take your time.

MAKING LAYERS

Secure the top of the cake with the palm of your hand and cut carefully, rotating the cake as you go.

46

STORING CAKES IN THE FREEZER

If you are baking ahead, you may need to freeze your cake. For best results, the cake should be frozen as sponges only—no filling or icing. Cool the cake completely, and wrap each piece individually in parchment paper followed by several layers of plastic wrap, then freeze for up to two months.

FROSTING & FINISHING



47

CLEAN EDGES

A common mistake made by amateur bakers is to frost and finish a cake, then move it to a serving plate. This inevitably results in the frosting cracking and can ruin a lot of hard work. Frost a cake directly on the serving plate you intend to use to prevent this from happening.

PARCHMENT PAPER TRICK

Insert strips of parchment paper under the edges of the cake to protect the serving plate as you work. Then slip them out after the frosting is finished.

48

PREVENTING ICING FROM PICKING UP CRUMBS

Decorating a cake takes a little practice, and often crumbs will get into the frosting, affecting the overall neatness of the result. To avoid this, coat the cake with a thin layer of melted and cooled jam, or thinned frosting, before applying the final layer of frosting.

QUALITY FINISH

A slightly flexible metal palette knife is an essential piece of equipment for a professionally finished cake.





49

KEEPING CAKES MOIST

Cupcakes are delicious, but they don't keep well. Because they are so small, they have a tendency to dry out more quickly than larger cakes. To prevent this from happening, be sure to frost them right to the edges of the paper, because this will effectively create an airtight seal around the cake.



Beautifully frosted cupcakes

**SPIRAL FROSTING**

For perfect frosting, start around the edges, close to the paper, and spiral around the cake to finish in the center.

50

IMPROVISING A PIPING BAG

Piping bags can be difficult to clean and unwieldy to hold, especially for small quantities of icing. Try improvising your own using a small, strong plastic freezer bag—it's easy to hold for small detail work, and it's disposable, too.

1 Spoon the icing into one corner of the bag, pushing it down gently to avoid air bubbles, which can spoil the finish.



2 Tie or clip the top of the bag, then use a pair of sharp scissors to snip off a small corner. Squeeze the bag gently to release the icing.

51

MIXING ICING COLOR

Food coloring can transform plain white frosting, turning your cake into a beautifully bright or prettily pale creation. Be aware that a little food coloring goes a long way. For best results, use the tip of a wooden skewer or toothpick to add the coloring a little at a time, until you achieve the desired result.



Bottle of food coloring



VARIED COLOR PALETTE

To achieve more unusual shades and colors, try combining several colors together, always a little at a time.



52

NO TIME FOR FROSTING?

Baking can be a time-consuming affair, and sometimes there isn't the opportunity to cool a cake, frost it, and allow the frosting to set before it is served. However, if time is a concern, you can still present a pretty, unfrosted cake. Simply use stencils to add a decorative edge to a fine dusting of confectioners sugar.

TIME-SAVING DECORATION

Cut your own shapes and use a small sieve or tea strainer to control the amount of confectioner's sugar you sprinkle over the finished cake.



53

QUICK & INTERESTING TOPPINGS FOR MUFFINS

Muffins are some of the simplest, fastest things to bake, and they can contain a wide variety of dried fruits and nuts, as well as other flavorings, either sweet or savory. Simple toppings, such as a handful of chocolate chunks, a quick streusel topping, or dried banana chips, can add a final flourish to these delicious baked goods.

STREUSEL TOPPING

A streusel topping adds a sweet, crumbly crunch to muffins, cakes, and other baked goods.

A quick streusel topping can be made by rubbing together cold, diced butter, some soft light brown sugar, a handful of oats, and some cinnamon.

This streusel mix stores well in the freezer, in a ziplock bag, and it can be used straight from frozen. Try making a large batch and storing the rest for later use.



Make a large batch and use as needed

54

FINISHING SWEET TARTS WITH A BLOWTORCH

A blowtorch can transform the look of a simple tart in a matter of seconds. Make sure that the tart is chilled before you begin—this will prevent the filling from heating with the flame. Sprinkle a thin layer of very fine sugar over the top of the tart, and use the blowtorch to achieve a brulée effect.



CARAMELIZING

Any set custardlike filling can be finished off with a blowtorch and caramelized. Just make sure the tart is well chilled before applying any heat. Leave to set before serving.

55

CREATING A SMOOTH TOP LAYER FOR FROSTING

When making a layered sponge cake, instead of creating two layers out of one thick sponge (see Tip 45), which can be quite tricky, bake two separate sponges. The domed surface of a well-risen cake can be hard to decorate. However, some simple trimming and careful selection can banish any unevenness in minutes, giving your cake the best surface for frosting.



1 Let the sponges rest for at least 5 minutes in their pans; this allows them to set up and makes them easier to remove.



2 When the sponges are cool, carefully trim off any uneven surfaces using a large serrated knife and a sawing motion.



3 Apply the filling to the base layer before placing the second sponge in position, choosing the best, flattest side to be the top.



4 A perfectly flat surface will make frosting the cake a simple task and give it a truly professional finish.



56

FINISHING FROSTING SMOOTHLY

The perfect finish to a cake is frosting that has a smooth, even surface. Using a ganache works well here, since this is poured over the cake, and its semiliquid nature makes it easy to achieve a perfectly smooth finish before it hardens. However, a buttercream frosting can be harder to coax into a smooth finish. A few simple tricks can speed the process along.



1 Dip a large, flexible metal palette knife in hot water. The heat will melt the frosting slightly, smoothing its surface as you work.



2 Wipe the knife quickly to remove any excess water that might spoil the frosting while retaining the heat in the blade.



3 Work around the sides of the cake, rotating it as you go. Use the full extent of the blade to sweep the frosting on the top into a perfectly smooth finish.

57

PLACING DECORATIONS IN FROSTING

Decorating a just-frosted cake can be even harder than frosting one smoothly. A soft ganache may mean the decorations sink in before it hardens; but spend too long frosting, and a simple icing-sugar-and-water frosting can harden before all the decorations are stuck down.



1 To establish how best to arrange the decorations, work it out on the dry, frosted cake first before sticking them down.



2 When you are happy with the overall look, use a small piping bag and a little simple frosting to stick the decorations to the cake.

58

CRYSTALLIZING EDIBLE FLOWER PETALS FOR DECORATING

To add a truly professional flourish to a special-occasion cake, try crystallizing real flowers as decorations. For the best results, find a selection of brightly colored edible flowers. Make sure they have fairly sturdy petals and that they are not likely to wilt too quickly.



1 Beat together 1 egg white with $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp water, and use this mixture to gently brush the petals all over.



2 Toss some very fine sugar over the petals, and leave the flowers to dry, separated, in a cool, dark place until set.



59

CHEAT'S CRÈME ANGLAISE FOR SERVING

A classic crème anglaise is a simple, stylish sauce that may be served with a rich cake or torte, rather like a thin homemade custard. However, when time is short, try this simple fuss-free alternative, which can be conjured up from just a few basic ingredients.



Vanilla extract



Single or double cream



Confectioner's sugar

QUICK CRÈME ANGLAISE

Whisk as much cream as you'll need with 1 tbsp confectioner's sugar and $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp vanilla extract to a thick pouring consistency. Serve in a pitcher.



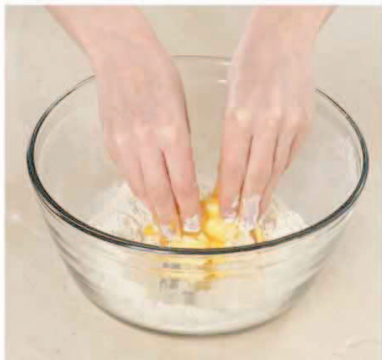
Delicious, pourable crème anglaise

PÂTISSERIE, MERINGUES & DESSERTS

60

RUBBING BUTTER IN

If you wish to make pastry, it is essential that the butter is well chilled before you begin to rub it into the flour. Rubbing butter in by hand takes little effort and is the best way of controlling the end result, since using a food mixer for this task can often result in overprocessing.



1 Use only your fingertips to rub the butter into the flour. This little trick prevents the mixture from overheating.



2 For simple pastry, the finished result should have the texture of coarse breadcrumbs.

61

USING ICE-COLD WATER

Using cold water, or even ice water, to bind pastry together is a simple way to achieve better results. Ice water prevents the fats in the pastry from breaking down, which would leave the pastry crumbly and difficult to handle when rolling out.



Pitcher of chilled water



62

RIISING IN THE REFRIGERATOR

Certain baked goods, such as cinnamon rolls, are better served fresh for breakfast, but they are too time-consuming to prepare on the spot. Plan ahead and allow the second rising to happen in the refrigerator overnight. Just be sure to bring the rolls to room temperature before baking as usual.



Perfectly risen cinnamon rolls

63

USING BUTTER IN DANISH PASTRY

Most recipes for Danish pastry call for the butter to be rolled out between pieces of parchment paper before incorporating it into the dough. However, this is a sticky and time-consuming process. For a simple, fuss-free result, try cutting well-chilled butter into slices and laying them directly onto the pastry.



1 Keep the butter in the refrigerator until it is time to use it to ensure it is well chilled and firm. Cut it into equal-sized slices.



2 Lay the slices of butter evenly on one half of the pastry, making sure you leave a small border all around.



3 Fold the other half of the dough over the butter, pressing the edges together to seal it in.



4 Flour the dough well and roll it out into a rectangle $\frac{3}{8}$ in (1cm) thick, before folding and chilling it as required.

64

HOW TO MAKE QUICK FLAKY PASTRY

Making a classic flaky pastry involves a time-consuming process of layering the butter over the dough (see Tip 63), then folding, rolling, and chilling it numerous times for the lightest, flakiest result.

Although this traditional method makes a fine pastry, when time is short it is possible to adopt this simple and speedy alternative, which produces pleasing results and is a lot less messy, too.



1 Put the butter in the freezer for 30 minutes or until it is semifrozen to allow it to be grated easily.



2 Gently incorporate the flour into the butter flakes until it is only just combined. This helps retain the texture of the pastry.

65

HOW TO MAKE A CHEWIER MERINGUE

There are times when a crisp meringue is called for, and others when a chewier result is what is required. To give your meringue a chewier finish, gently fold a teaspoon each of cornstarch and white-wine vinegar into the mixture before cooking.



White-wine vinegar



FRESHNESS IS IMPORTANT

Baking staples such as cornstarch lose their efficacy if old or stale, so check the date.



66

HOW TO CLEAN A BOWL FOR USE WITH EGG WHITES

Whisking egg whites can be a difficult process—even the smallest amount of shell or egg yolk in the bowl can cause the whites to resist your efforts to bring them to soft or stiff peaks. For perfect results every time, go through the following procedure. First of all, ensure that the bowl is perfectly clean, free of any greasy or dusty residue. Next, rub the inside of the bowl with the cut side of a lemon or a little white vinegar, then wipe it dry with a paper towel before beginning to whisk the egg whites.

CITRUS LAYER

To avoid waste, cut just a little off the end of a lemon—enough that the flesh is exposed—rather than using a whole half.



67

HOW TO GET WHITER MERINGUES

The secret to producing meringues of remarkable snowy whiteness, with a crisp exterior and a hollow interior, is a long, slow cooking time. An extremely low oven heat helps (the ideal temperature being around 240°F/120°C). If your oven doesn't go low enough, consider using a wooden spoon to prop the door open slightly.



DELICIOUS MERINGUES

A meringue is ready when it is crisp on the outside and sounds hollow when tapped gently on the underside.

68

AVOID CRACKING

Meringues are fragile goods and can crack easily once cooked, which can be very frustrating because they take so long to bake. Meringues tend to crack because they are susceptible to sudden changes in temperature. Prevent this from occurring by turning off the oven when they are ready and leaving them to cool inside.

COOLING MERINGUES

Once they are cool to the touch, place the meringues on a rack and allow them to cool completely before storing.



69

HOW TO STABILIZE EGG WHITES

The more stable the egg-white mixture, the more likely it is to hold its shape and cook into a perfectly crisp, peaked meringue. Although good whisking should achieve this, sometimes a little extra help is needed. Try adding some cream of tartar, white vinegar, or a few drops of lemon juice to the mix after the sugar is incorporated.

FOLDING IN THE STABILIZER

Be gentle when adding the stabilizing agent into the mix, so as to lose as little volume as possible before baking.





70

HOW TO USE FROZEN EGG WHITES

If you bake on a regular basis, you will often need the odd egg yolk to bind together a rich pastry. When this is the case, do not throw away the leftover egg white, but freeze it in an

airtight container until you have enough to make meringues.

There is no need to try to remember how many you have—just defrost them, weigh them, and use double the weight of sugar to egg whites for perfect meringues.

EGG-TO-SUGAR RATIO

Weighing egg whites is a simple trick for calculating the amount of sugar needed for meringues. Use digital scales (see Tip 13) for maximum accuracy.



71

**REMOVING
BROKEN
EGGSHELL
FROM BATTER**

Every baker knows how annoying it is to crack an egg into cake batter or a bowl only to see a few small pieces of shell appear in the batter, too. It can be remarkably hard to fish bits of eggshell out with a teaspoon or any other kitchen implement. Instead, try using the broken half of the eggshell—the sticky interior of the shell will attract the loose pieces and make them easier to remove.

MINIMIZING SHARDS

Cracking the eggs on a flat surface, such as the counter, rather than the sharp side of a bowl, reduces the likelihood of shards.



72

ROLLING A JELLY ROLL OR ROULADE WITHOUT CRACKING

A roulade is a great dessert for a special occasion or dinner, and it has the added advantage of being easy to transport and serve. To ensure that your roulade makes a good impression on the dinner table, below are a couple of tricks you can use to prevent it from cracking—often the result of an overcooked sponge.



1 When the sponge is ready to come out (see Tip 44), remove it from the oven and invert it onto a clean, damp tea towel while it is still hot.



2 Tightly roll the sponge up around the damp dish towel before leaving it to cool. This will help it keep its shape.

PERFECT ROULADE

When the sponge has cooled, carefully unroll it, then fill it and reroll it. If the odd crack appears in the sponge, try disguising it with a decorative flourish.





73

HOW TO PREVENT A CHEESECAKE FROM CRACKING

Rather like meringues, cheesecakes take a long time in a cool oven to cook correctly. Also like meringues, they tend to crack if exposed to quick changes in temperature while they cool. After a lengthy preparation and cooking time, cheesecakes need an equally lengthy cooling time, ideally still inside the oven, to ensure a perfect finish.



1 A cheesecake is done when the surface springs back when gently pressed with a finger and the edges begin to come away from the pan.



2 If you are happy that the cheesecake is baked all the way through, turn off the oven. Do not remove the cheesecake, but allow it to cool inside.



SERVING SUGGESTIONS

Once the cheesecake has cooled and chilled, gently slice it with a sharp knife, and serve it with a fruit coulis or other suitable sauce.

74

HOW TO MAKE A GOOD SOUFFLÉ

Soufflés have a well-deserved reputation for being difficult to make. Every single aspect of the process—the method, the timing, and even the serving—has to be absolutely correct to produce a perfectly risen dessert. However, with the tips detailed below, making a soufflé can become a fairly straightforward technique to master.



1 A well-greased ramekin, brushed with melted butter, will help the soufflé rise evenly.



2 Dust the inside of the ramekin with fine sugar, and tap out any excess, to stop the batter from sticking.



3 Cook out the flour in the melted butter. Do this over a low heat to prevent it from browning.



4 Thoroughly whisk the milk into the roux and heat it slowly, stirring to avoid any lumps.



5 Try adding simple flavorings, such as citrus zest, to improve the flavor of a soufflé.



6 When it is time to add the sugar, stir it well to ensure that it has dissolved fully.



7 Wait until the mixture is quite cool before beating in the egg yolks, to prevent them from overheating.



8 Whisk the egg whites well to form medium peaks so that they will maintain their shape later.



9 When adding the beaten egg whites, start with a single spoon to loosen the mixture.



10 Gently fold in the remaining egg whites, being careful not to lose any volume in the process.



11 Carefully pour the mixture into the center of the ramekin, filling it up almost to the rim.



12 Rub your finger gently along the inside of the rim to indent the mixture and help it rise straight.



13 When ready, the soufflés should be golden and well risen but still a little molten in the center. They should be served immediately.

PIES & TARTS

75

HOW TO ROLL PASTRY FOR BEST RESULTS

When working with pastry, the best advice is to keep everything as cool as possible. This includes the environment (the kitchen and the work surface), any tools (from a rolling pin to your hands), and, of course, the pastry itself. Marble boards are ideal for rolling out pastry because they tend to remain cool.



COOL IS THE WORD

Roll out chilled pastry on a lightly floured surface with a good rolling pin, and apply a gentle pressure to achieve an even surface.



76

HOW TO BIND PASTRY FOR A RICHER EFFECT

Although pastry is commonly made with water, it is also possible to bind it with anything from sour cream to milk for a different effect. Some bakers swear by a teaspoon of vodka to produce perfect pastry.

FOR A RICHER CRUST

An egg yolk beaten with a little cold water can be used to bind the dough together to produce a richer crust.



77

HOW TO PREVENT SHRINKAGE & CRACKING

There are several reasons why pastry shrinks or cracks on cooking, and most concern the overdevelopment of the gluten in the flour. To prevent this from happening, do not overwork your pastry, and always allow it to rest before cooking.



1 Bring the pastry together as quickly as possible, taking care not to handle it excessively.



2 Wrap the pastry in plastic wrap and chill it for 30 minutes to allow the gluten to relax before rolling it out.

78

**AVOID OVER-
FLOURING
SURFACES**

When rolling out pastry, especially a rich, buttery one, it is tempting to keep sprinkling flour on both the pastry and the work surface to prevent it from sticking. However, whenever you do this, you are unintentionally incorporating potentially significant amounts of flour into your delicate pastry. This added flour could change the structure of the pastry, making it hard and dry, so try to be as frugal as possible when flouring the work surface.

**A LITTLE GOES A LONG WAY**

A good pastry prepared correctly and in a cool kitchen should roll out well without too much added flour.

79

AVOID REROLLING

Rolling out pastry is an acquired skill. As you roll it out, pastry might crack and stick, and in those instances you will have to bring it back together and reroll it. Beware, however, of doing this too often. The additional handling creates heat and activates the gluten in the flour. The resulting pastry could therefore become tough and more liable to shrink on baking.

**WASTE NOT**

You can put any scraps of pastry to good use. However, rather than rerolling them into a bigger piece, which is likely to cause the pastry to shrink, try making a few simple tart shells, fill them with jam or lemon curd, and bake them until golden.



80

HOW TO KEEP PASTRY CRISP WHEN USING FILLINGS

Once a pastry crust is blind-baked (see Tip 83), it is ready to be trimmed and filled. Placing uncooked fillings, such as cream or *crème pâtissière* and fresh fruit, directly on the pastry will result in the bottom of the tart case turning soggy. To prevent this from happening, create a protective layer—for example, with jam.



1 While the pastry is still warm, use a small, sharp knife to trim away the excess pastry from the rim of the case.



2 Melt a small quantity of jam or chocolate, and use it to brush the bottom of the tart case before leaving it to set.

3 Once the lining is set, fill the tart with your chosen filling, and decorate as required.



81

MAKING HOT-WATER PASTRY

With its use of lard or vegetable shortening, hot-water pastry should be an occasional treat rather than an everyday pastry. Having said that, it is not difficult to prepare, and it produces a gloriously rich, flaky result that is unlike any other kind of pastry. Hot-water pastry is particularly suitable for use with meat products, such as pork and game.



1 Sift the dry ingredients in a large bowl and create a well in the center.



2 Gently pour the hot melted fat and water into the well.



3 Use a wooden spoon to stir the mixture together until it is well combined.

4 Handling the hot pastry carefully, work to bring it together. You will have to be quick, since it will harden as it cools.



Be careful not to burn your hands

Pastry is easy to work while hot



82

HOW TO TRANSFER PASTRY INTO A PIE PAN

After you have made and rolled out your pastry, you will have to transfer it from the work surface to a pan. This can be a tricky business, because pastry can break if it is picked up incorrectly. However, the simple method illustrated here will ensure that pastry can be moved quickly and successfully every time.



1 Prepare the pastry as usual, rolling it out on a lightly floured work surface to your required thickness.



2 Roll the pastry around the rolling pin, then gently unroll it directly over the pan.

3 Press the pastry firmly into the bottom edges of the pan, then up the sides, before trimming off any excess.



83

WHAT IS BLIND BAKING?

Blind baking is a simple, extremely useful method of prebaking an empty tart crust for filling or for storing and using at a later date.

The technique is not as difficult as it seems, and it ensures that the bottom of a pie or tart will be cooked through even with the wettest filling. It is possible to purchase ceramic baking beans that can be used over and over; a cheaper alternative is to use dried chickpeas or other beans, making sure to label them as blind-baking beans when you store them for future use.



1 Prick the bottom of the pastry case with a fork to allow steam to escape. This prevents the pastry rising and forming air bubbles.



2 Line the pastry case with a sheet of parchment paper and fill it with ceramic baking beans or dried chickpeas.



3 Make sure that the baking beans are evenly distributed, covering the bottom of the case in a thick, uniform layer.



4 Once the pastry case is cooked, gently remove the beans and paper. Cook for a further 5 minutes to finish the base.



84

FREEZING PASTRY FOR LATER USE

Freezing blind-baked pastry cases is a great way to prepare ahead when you have to bake for a large number of people or a special occasion. Bake your pastry cases, wait for them to cool, then wrap

them individually in plastic wrap, followed by a layer of aluminum foil. Finally, make sure you label them before freezing. The edges of the pastry cases may get knocked and broken if they are piled up or crushed in the freezer, so store them carefully. Even better, freeze individual pastry cases, then stack them in a large container in the freezer.

FREEZE NOW, FILL LATER

It is best to freeze pastry cases unfilled, since the filling can deteriorate in the freezer over time.

**FILL WHEN READY TO EAT**

Fill the still-frozen pastry cases with the desired filling, and bake them in the usual manner. The baking will refresh the pastry, leaving it as crisp as when it was first cooked.

85

EASY TIPS FOR FLAVORING PASTRY

Once you have mastered the art of making simple pastry, there are many different twists you can put on it to make it your own.

Both sweet and savory pastry can be flavored with various herbs and spices to complement the filling. Add just a little to begin with, then bake a small piece of the pastry while the remainder rests in the refrigerator to see how the flavors work out before you decide whether to add more.



SWEET

A simple addition to any sweet pastry is a couple of tablespoons of granulated sugar, which gives a sweet, crisp finish to the pastry. Cocoa can also be added in place of some of the flour.



FLAVORINGS FOR SAVORY PASTRY

Fresh herbs such as basil can be blended in a food processor with the flour (adding the butter afterward) to make an attractive summery pastry. A very small sprinkling of thyme, oregano, or sage can be added to a savory pie or cobbler topping.

Sun-dried tomato paste adds flavor and richness to a Mediterranean tart; or try using your favorite seeds and spices.

Finally, if you're after a pleasing contrast of flavors, try adding grated strong cheddar to an apple pie crust.

SAVORY

Savory fillings need only a complementary herb processed into the flour to add color and flavor to the dish.



86

MAKING ATTRACTIVE PIE TOPS

As key as the taste of a pie is, presentation is also important, and finishing a pie with a decorative design will make it more appealing. There are several techniques that can give your pies the flourish they deserve, from a simple pinch-to-cripp border to a more elaborate feathering effect. Cut vents in the top to allow steam to escape.



Simple and neat border

SCALLOPED

Press your forefinger firmly onto the pastry rim, then use the tip of a table knife to indent the pastry on either side of your finger.



Moisten edge of pie with water before positioning braid

BRAIDED

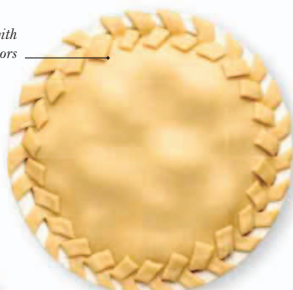
Cut out three ½in- (1cm-) wide pastry strips long enough to go around the entire pie. Braid them together, then position the braid on the pie.



Pastry strip is long enough to go around whole pie

TWISTED RIBBON

Holding a 1in- (2cm-) wide pastry strip at one end, twist it from the other end. Secure it in place.



Make cuts with kitchen scissors

FEATHERED

Make 1in (2cm) cuts, ½in (1cm) apart, into the edge of the pastry. Fold every other flap of pastry back, diagonally, along the edge of the pie.



Use forefinger and thumb to pinch pastry

FLUTED

Pinch the pastry while making indentations at a slight angle in the edge.

BREADS, BATTERS & PIZZAS

87

HOW TO START YEAST

Starting yeast to make bread usually involves activating dried yeast with warm water. The temperature of the water is of paramount importance: if it is too cold, the yeast will not activate; but if it is too hot, it will kill the yeast. The ideal temperature of the water is room temperature or lukewarm. A pinch of sugar can help, too.

USING YEAST

Pour the dried yeast (make sure that it is in date) into the warm water, and whisk until it has completely dissolved.



*Bubbles and
craters on surface
of yeast*

END RESULT

After a few minutes at room temperature, the mixture should foam up and start to bubble slightly.



88

ADDING SALT

Most breads benefit from the addition of a little salt to enhance their flavor. However, it is important to add the salt at the right time. Adding salt directly to the yeast can kill the yeast and stop the bread from rising. To get around this, add the salt to the flour separately from the activated yeast mixture.

MIXING SALT IN

Use a balloon whisk to distribute the salt into the flour evenly before adding the activated yeast mixture.

89

AMBIENT TEMPERATURE FOR RISING

In order for bread dough to rise well and quickly, it needs to be left at the correct temperature. If the temperature is too low, the dough will still rise, albeit very slowly; however, when the environment is too hot, there is the real risk of killing the yeast and stopping the rise altogether. The ideal place for your dough to rise is a warm room, somewhere between 70°F (21°C) and 90°F (32°C). Before leaving the dough to rise, cover it with greased plastic wrap.

IDEAL ENVIRONMENT

An oven that has been gently warmed for a few minutes, then turned off makes a suitable rising place.





90

ALLOWING THE DOUGH TO RISE

To make sure the dough rises well, put it in a large, clean bowl with plenty of room for it to expand. Spray the inside of the bowl with a little baking spray, then gently place the dough in the bottom. Also spray one side of a large piece of plastic wrap, and use it, sprayed side down, to seal the bowl.

SEALING THE BOWL

A warm, draft-free environment will help the dough rise, so make sure the bowl you use is well sealed with plastic wrap.

91

THE WINDOWPANE TEST FOR DOUGH

The windowpane test is a simple check that can tell you, at a glance, whether your bread has been kneaded enough and is ready for the next stage. Take a walnut-sized piece of dough and stretch it between the thumbs and forefingers of two hands to make a thin sheet of dough. If the dough is semitranslucent and lets light through it without breaking or tearing, then it is ready to move on.



KNEADING WORKOUT

Use the heel of your hand to push the dough down and away from you to help stretch it out and encourage the necessary elasticity.

LOOKING THROUGH THE DOUGH

To establish whether you have kneaded your dough sufficiently, stretch a small piece of it between your hands. It should not tear.





92

PROOFING BEFORE BAKING

After bread has risen for the first time (see Tip 90), it is kneaded briefly (called “knocking back”) before being shaped into its final form. It is then left to proof, or rise, for a second time. To help a loaf proof successfully, cover it in greased plastic wrap and keep in a warm, draft-free environment, as with the first rise. After proofing, the dough may need scoring before baking.



SCORE FOR CONTROL

Scoring a loaf of bread just before baking helps control the direction and height of the rise that will occur in the oven.



93

HOW TO MAKE BAGELS

Bagels are among those baked goods that should be enjoyed as fresh as possible, preferably while they are still warm, right out of the oven. Although professional bagel bakeries have huge steam ovens to help them produce perfect results, the home baker can easily replicate the process.



1 Whisk together all the dry ingredients in a large bowl until they are well combined.



2 Add a mixture of activated yeast, water, and a little oil, then bring the dough together.



3 Knead the dough on a lightly floured surface for 10 minutes, until it is stretchy and smooth.



4 Place the dough in a greased bowl in a warm place, and let it rise until doubled in size.



5 Transfer the dough to a lightly floured surface, and divide it into equally sized pieces.



6 Roll each piece of dough gently under the palm of your hand until it forms a fat log shape.



7 Roll and pull each piece of dough until it looks like a fat cigar, about 10in (25cm) long.



8 Wrap each dough cigar around your knuckles, joining it underneath your palm.



9 Gently squeeze the join together to make a large ring shape, with a large hole.



10 Place the bagels on a lined baking sheet, while you continue to shape the rest of the dough.



11 Cover the bagels with plastic wrap greased with baking spray, and leave to rise for a second time.



12 Preheat the oven and at the same time put a large pan of water on the stove to heat.



13 Bring the water to a boil, then turn down the heat and poach each bagel for 1 minute on each side.



14 Remove the bagels from the water with a slotted spoon, and dry them with a clean dish towel.



15 Return the bagels to the baking sheet and brush them with a little egg wash.



16 Now the bagels are ready to be put in the oven. Once baked, they should be golden brown, well risen, and glossy to the touch.

Color is pleasant golden brown



94

HOW TO MAKE PRETZELS

Much like bagels (see Tip 93), pretzels also taste their best the moment they come out of the oven. Although the process for making pretzels is rather lengthy, it is not difficult, and the simple dough needed can be converted into sweet or savory pretzels, or even wrapped around hot dogs for the ultimate pretzeldog.



1 Whisk the dry ingredients required in a large bowl, and mix them until they are well combined.



2 Sprinkle dried yeast over warm water. Leave it to rest for 5 minutes to activate it.



3 Combine the wet and dry ingredients, and bring them together to form a soft dough.



4 Knead the dough for about 10 minutes, until it is smooth.



5 Place the dough in a lightly greased bowl and let rise in a warm place until it has doubled in size.



6 Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and gently knock it back (knead out excess air).



7 Divide the dough into equally sized pieces and roll them into short, fat log shapes.



8 Roll the pieces under the palms of your hands, stretching them until they are about 18in (45cm) long.



9 Take each end of the dough and cross them over each other to form a heart shape.



10 Twist the ends of the dough around each other, as though they had linked arms.



11 Secure the ends to the sides of the pretzel—it should still be quite loose.



12 Put the pretzels on a lined baking sheet and cover with plastic wrap. Rise them again in a warm place.



13 While the oven is heating, mix $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp baking soda with 2 tbsp boiling water.



14 Brush the risen pretzels with this mixture. It gives them their typical color and crust.



15 Scatter flakes of sea salt or sesame seeds over the pretzels before putting them in the oven.



16 Five minutes before they are due to come out of the oven, brush the tops with a little egg wash (beaten egg mixed with milk or water) for a final glaze.

17 Once cooked, serve them warm, straight from the oven, with butter, honey, or a little mustard.





95

HOW TO GIVE YOUR BREAD A SPRINGY TOP

Ensure that your bread has a light, springy crust by baking it in a steamy oven. Steam is especially important during the first part of the baking. To introduce steam to the oven, place a roasting pan half full of boiling water in the bottom of the oven just before baking your bread. There are also a few other tricks you can use.



SPRAY THE BREAD

A little water sprayed onto the top of the bread just before cooking should help give it a light, springy crust.



SPRAY THE OVEN

Try spraying the bottom and sides of the oven briefly before you put the bread in, and every ten minutes while it is cooking. Be sure to spray and close the door again quickly, though.



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HOW TO ACHIEVE A PROFESSIONAL CRUNCHY CRUST

Next time you buy good-quality bread from a professional bakery, notice its underside, which should have a nice, crunchy crust. Similarly, a good pizza should have a crisp base. This crunchy finish comes from baking in professional ovens that reach very high temperatures. However, there are a few simple yet effective tricks that can help you achieve these results at home.

PIZZA CRUST

A perfect thin-crust pizza should have a crisp base, as well as being slightly blistered at the edges and puffed up in places. Scatter the baking tray with a little fine cornmeal to help achieve this.



BREAD CRUST

Good homemade bread should be golden brown and well risen, with a crunchy top crust. To help the underside of the bread get crisp, put a little scattered flour or semolina on the tray before baking.



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HOW TO TEST WHEN BREAD IS DONE

To ensure that each loaf is baked to perfection, do not open the oven until at least the minimal cooking time mentioned in your recipe has passed (see Tip 8). At this stage, the most accurate way of determining whether bread is fully baked consists of inserting a thermometer into the center of the loaf. The temperature should be 200°F (94°C). If you don't have this tool, you can still use sight and sound to determine doneness.



VISUAL INDICATIONS

Bread that is baked to perfection should be golden brown in color and have a dry, firm crust. It should also detach easily from the baking sheet or pan.

DOES IT SOUND COOKED?

Carefully pick up the bread—use a dish towel to avoid getting burned.

Knock on the underside with your knuckles. If it sounds hollow, it means it is ready to come out of the oven.





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ALLOW TO REST BEFORE CUTTING

It is tempting to cut into home-baked bread as soon as it comes out of the oven and to enjoy a slice while it's still hot. However, if you do so, you will end up with a damp, compressed loaf that will remain misshapen where you've cut it. Allow the bread to rest for at least 20 minutes before you cut into it. This interval will allow the interior steam to disperse gradually, leaving the bread light and springy.



PROFESSIONAL FINISH

Bread that has been allowed to rest is easier to cut into uniform slices and more likely to stay together without crumbling.



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HANDLING & USING CIABATTTA DOUGH

If you are baking ciabatta bread, make sure that the dough is wet and loose on kneading, since this will help create the large air pockets traditionally found in the finished loaf. Wet doughs are much easier to knead in a machine fitted with a dough hook. If you don't have this particular attachment, however, follow the steps below.



USE YOUR HOOK

When kneading wet dough, a hook prevents the dough from becoming warm and sticky, as it would if you kneaded it by hand.



1 Carefully tip the risen dough out of the bowl and onto the work surface, trying to handle it lightly.



2 Knead with your knuckles, trying not to incorporate too much extra flour into the dough, which should remain loose and wet.



AIR POCKETS

Soft, sticky dough is difficult to handle, but it is the only way to obtain a well-risen ciabatta loaf with the customary large air pockets inside.



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HANDLING & USING PIZZA DOUGH

Pizza dough is similar to ciabatta dough (see Tip 99), in that it should be a loose, damp dough that is quite delicate to handle. With pizza dough, gentle stretching rather than vigorous rolling is the best way to achieve the desired shape without losing valuable air pockets in the dough.

**ROLL IT**

Roll the pizza dough out as gently as possible, putting only very little pressure on it.

**HANG IT**

Use your hands to stretch the dough, and let it hang by its own weight until it gradually grows larger.

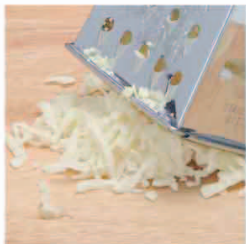
**STRETCH IT**

Finally, use your hands to gently stretch the enlarged dough to its final shape on a lightly floured baking sheet.

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MAKING A STUFFED-CRUST PIZZA

Once you've mastered the art of baking pizza, you can start experimenting with various toppings and finishes. The heart of the pizza is a good, homemade tomato sauce and fresh mozzarella. After that, anything goes—even a stuffed cheesy crust.



1 If you wish to create a stuffed cheesy crust for your homemade pizza, use shredded mozzarella (not buffalo).



2 Press handfuls of the cheese into thin sausagelike shapes, and place them around the edge of the pizza.



3 Roll the edges of the pizza dough over the cheese, sealing it with a little egg wash, then bake as usual.

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