

## Chocolate Cupcakes

*There are two secrets to these cupcakes. They get their rich, extra-chocolaty flavor from a combination of unsweetened cocoa powder and bittersweet chocolate, and their soft, moist texture from a simple hand-mixing method.*

Preheat an oven to 350°F. Line a standard 12-cup muffin pan with paper or foil liners.

In a bowl, whisk together the flour, cocoa powder, baking powder and salt. Place the chocolate and butter in a large heatproof bowl and set over but not touching simmering water in a saucepan; stir frequently until melted and smooth, about 5 minutes. Remove the bowl from the saucepan and let the chocolate mixture cool to room temperature, 10 to 15 minutes.

Using a wooden spoon, stir the sugar into the chocolate mixture until combined. Stir in the eggs one at a time, beating until combined after each addition, then beat in the vanilla. Gently fold in the flour mixture just until no traces of flour remain; do not overmix.

Divide the batter evenly among the prepared muffin cups, filling each about three-fourths full. Bake until a toothpick inserted into the center of a cupcake comes out with only a few moist crumbs attached, 22 to 24 minutes. Transfer the pan to a wire rack and let cool for 5 minutes. Then transfer the cupcakes to the rack and let cool completely, about 1 hour.

Frost the cupcakes with the buttercream, garnish with grated chocolate and serve. (The frosted cupcakes can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 3 days; bring to room temperature before serving.) Makes 12 cupcakes.

Adapted from *Cupcakes*, by Shelly Kaldunski (Weldon Owen, 2008).

### Ingredients for Chocolate Cupcakes

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup all-purpose flour

2½ Tbs. unsweetened cocoa powder

$\frac{3}{4}$  tsp. baking powder

$\frac{1}{4}$  tsp. salt

3 oz. bittersweet chocolate, chopped

11 Tbs. unsalted butter, cut into pieces

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup plus 2 Tbs. sugar

3 eggs, at room temperature

1 tsp. vanilla extract

Vanilla buttercream for frosting  
cupcakes

Grated chocolate for garnish  
(optional)

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### Cake Styles

There's a different type of cake to suit every taste. The following are some of the most popular ones:

**American Layer Cake:** This basic butter cake is flavored with whatever suits the baker, from vanilla to coffee to strawberry. The cake is usually frosted.

**Angel Food Cake:** This tall, single-layer, butterless white cake is leavened with egg whites and baked in a tube pan. It is seldom frosted.

**American Sponge Cake:** A sponge cake is quite similar to an angel food cake but is slightly richer and moister. This is because it includes egg yolks that are beaten separately from the whites and then folded together.

**Génoise:** A French version of sponge cake, génoise is also leavened with eggs. The difference is that the eggs are beaten together with sugar, and often a small amount of butter is added, resulting in a delicate texture that lends itself to layered and rolled cakes, such as jelly rolls.

**Chiffon Cake:** This moist, light American classic falls somewhere between a sponge cake (it also contains lots of separated eggs) and a butter cake (although it often uses oil rather than butter).

**Devil's Food Cake:** This rich chocolate cake is made from a mix of acidic and alkaline ingredients that produces a reddish hue.

**Pound Cake:** Usually baked in a loaf pan, this old-fashioned cake is rarely frosted. Its name comes from the weight of each ingredient—butter, sugar, eggs, flour—traditionally needed to make one cake.

Adapted from *Williams-Sonoma Kitchen Companion* (Time-Life Books, 2000).

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# Technique Class: Baking Series: Cakes & Cupcakes



Most celebrations, whether large or small, planned or spontaneous, elegant or casual, call for a cake. Indeed, at weddings and birthdays, a festively decorated cake is the culinary star. In other instances, it transforms an ordinary meal into an occasion.

Cakes are divided into two main types: foam cakes and butter cakes. Foam cakes have a high proportion of eggs, sugar and liquid to flour, and the air trapped in the beaten eggs is the primary leavener. They contain very little if any fat, such as butter or oil, and so have a relatively dry, spongy texture. Popular foam cakes include angel food cake and sponge cake.

Butter cakes are richer and more velvety and rely on chemical leaveners—baking powder and baking soda. They are made with a comparatively high percentage of butter. Typical butter cakes are American layer cakes and pound cakes. Here you'll find tips for baking cakes like a professional.

## Basic Cake Techniques

Here are some general techniques regularly used in baking. Some are simple while others take a little practice. These easy-to-follow steps will help you master all of the techniques.

### Preparing Pans

To prepare a pan for baking so that your baked item does not stick, you can butter, flour and/or line the pan with parchment (baking) paper.

1. To butter a pan, place a small amount of soft butter on a piece of waxed paper and then spread the butter over the bottom and sides of the pan.
2. To flour a pan, add 2 Tbs. of flour to the buttered pan and tilt and shake so the flour adheres to the butter. Turn the pan over, tap it on a work surface and discard the extra flour.
3. To line a pan with parchment paper, cut a piece of parchment to fit. (To line a round cake pan, fold a piece of parchment larger than the cake pan into quarters. Place the point of the parchment into the center of the pan, so that it creases along the edge. Cut along the creases, unfold and use.) Or grease the pan with butter, then press the parchment cut into the bottom of the pan. Some recipes suggest buttering the top of the parchment once placed in the pan.

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## Whipping Egg Whites

Whipping egg whites can be tricky unless you follow a few simple rules.

- Use a clean, large bowl. Any fat or grease, such as butter or even a speck of egg yolk, will impede the fluffiness that you are trying to achieve.
- An unlined copper bowl is the best type to use, but a stainless-steel bowl is a good substitute.

- Always use room-temperature egg whites. If your eggs are cold, you can still separate them; then place the bowl of egg whites in a larger bowl filled with hot water to warm them briefly before beating.

- Use a balloon whisk, a handheld mixer or a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment to whip the egg whites. If using a mixer, start on medium speed, increasing the speed to medium-high as the whites thicken.

- If you are adding sugar to the egg whites, start adding it very slowly once the whites are foamy.

- Be careful not to overwhip the egg whites, as they can quickly become grainy and may start to separate.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *Essentials of Baking*, by Cathy Burgett, Elinor Klivans & Lou Seibert Pappas (Oxmoor House, 2008).

### Creaming Butter and Sugar

Creaming together butter and sugar creates a light, airy mixture that helps leaven the baked item and produces a more tender texture. The butter should be cool room temperature: too cold and it is difficult to cream and aerate; too warm and the mixture will be dense and greasy. An electric mixer is easiest but a wooden spoon can be used.

Put the butter and the sugar in a bowl. With the mixer on medium speed, or using firm strokes with the spoon, cream the butter and sugar. The mixture should be pale yellow and fluffy. Use a rubber spatula to scrape down the bowl a few times when mixing.

### Creaming Egg Yolks and Sugar

Creaming egg yolks and sugar, like creaming butter and sugar, is a way to add air to your baked item. Sugar can “burn” the egg yolks, forming granular lumps, so never add sugar to egg yolks until just before you are ready to use the creamed mixture.

- In a sturdy bowl, using a regular or balloon whisk, a handheld mixer or a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, whip together the egg yolks and sugar vigorously by hand or on medium-high speed with the mixer.

- Continue whipping until the mixture is lighter in color. It is ready when you lift a bit of the mixture with the whisk and it falls back into the bowl, forming a ribbon that slowly dissolves on the surface.

### Folding Ingredients

Folding a light, aerated mixture, such as whipped egg whites, into a heavier batter is easy with some practice. Use a gentle hand and as few strokes as possible, so as not to deflate the air bubbles you have worked to achieve.

- Using a large rubber spatula, gently stir one-fourth of the lighter mixture into the heavier batter. This lightens the batter.

- Add the rest of the lighter mixture, piling it on top of the batter.

- Using the spatula, slice down through the center of the mixture to the bottom of the bowl. Then pull the spatula toward the edge of the bowl and, keeping the flat side against the bottom and side of the bowl, pull it up the side and over the top of the lighter mixture, bringing some heavier batter with it. Rotate the bowl a quarter turn and repeat. Continue folding in this manner just until the lighter mixture is incorporated into the batter. Do not overfold or you will deflate the batter. A little streaking is fine.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *Essentials of Baking*, by Cathy Burgett, Elinor Klivans & Lou Seibert Pappas (Oxmoor House, 2008).

## Chuck’s Golden Ginger Cake

*This cake has been a Williams-Sonoma classic for more than 30 years. For the best flavor, be sure to use young Australian crystallized ginger.*

Have all the ingredients at room temperature.

Preheat an oven to 325°F. Grease and flour a 7-inch springform pan or a 7-cup tube pan.

In a bowl, stir together the crystallized ginger, dates, pecans, pistachio nuts and raisins until blended. Set aside.

Over a sheet of waxed paper, sift together the flour and baking powder. Set aside.

In a large bowl, using an electric hand mixer, beat the butter and brown sugar until light and fluffy, 3 to 4 minutes. Add the eggs a little at a time, beating until the mixture is fluffy, then add the orange zest.

Using a rubber spatula, fold in the flour mixture in three additions, alternating with the milk and vanilla and ending with the flour, until smooth and no lumps of flour remain. Then fold in the ginger, date, nut and raisin mixture; do not overmix. Spoon the batter into the prepared pan, smooth the top with a spatula, and decorate with the ginger pieces, dates and pecans.

Bake until the cake is lightly browned and a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean, about 1¼ hours. Transfer the pan to a wire rack and let cool for about 20 minutes. Set the rack over a sheet of waxed paper and invert the cake onto the rack.

While the cake is still warm, insert a thick skewer through the top in 6 to 8 places and fill the holes with Grand Marnier. Wrap the cake tightly with plastic wrap and then with aluminum foil. Store in an airtight container for at least 3 days before serving. Serves 8 to 10.

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## Quick Buttercream Frosting

*Use this fluffy frosting to decorate cakes and cupcakes or as a filling for baked goods.*

Have all the ingredients at room temperature.

In the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the flat beater, combine the confectioners’ sugar, butter, the 4½ Tbs. milk, the vanilla and salt and beat on low speed until combined, about 1 minute. Stop the mixer and scrape down the sides of the bowl. Increase the speed to medium and beat until fluffy, about 3 minutes.

If the frosting is dry, add more milk, 1 tsp. at a time, until it is creamy but still holds peaks. Tint with food coloring as desired. Makes about 4 cups.

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### Ingredients for Chuck’s Golden Ginger Cake

1 cup crystallized ginger, diced

1 cup dates, pitted and cut into thirds

1 cup pecans, cut into small pieces

½ cup roasted pistachio nuts, shelled and halved

½ cup golden raisins

1½ cups sifted all-purpose flour

1 tsp. baking powder

8 Tbs. (1 stick) unsalted butter

½ cup firmly packed light brown sugar

3 eggs, lightly beaten

1 Tbs. grated orange zest

3 Tbs. milk

1 tsp. vanilla extract

Whole ginger pieces, dates and pecan halves for garnish

¼ to ⅓ cup Grand Marnier

### Ingredients for Quick Buttercream Frosting

6 cups confectioners’ sugar

16 Tbs. (2 sticks) unsalted butter

4½ Tbs. milk, plus more, if needed

2 tsp. vanilla extract

¼ tsp. salt

Food colorings (optional)