

Blue Ribbon Baking...tips for success

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Ever wonder how some people always earn blue ribbons for their baking at county and state fair? There is no real guarantee – because judging is one person’s opinion – but there are a few ways that you can ensure that you produce quality baked goods every time. Below are some tried and true (but not necessarily obvious) tips from Becky Crawford, nutrition educator from CCE Cayuga County and Celeste Carmichael, State 4-H Specialist and former state fair Consumer & Family Science Superintendent.

In addition to the tips below...be sure that you: read the class that you are entering carefully (and follow the guidelines), write a good description on your exhibitor information card (for state fair), follow your recipe carefully and always use the freshest ingredients possible.

All fats are not created equal:

You have some choices on how you add fats to your recipe – regardless of how the recipe is written. You can alter your recipe by using/substituting any of the following for each other...butter, margarine, shortening & (sometimes) oils...and then there are low fat substitutes. Each of these ingredients slightly changes the consistency of your end product, the texture, look and flavor (ex. butter is high in fat and will make your cookies spread out thin but tastes great, shortening will produce firmer, higher cookies but doesn't have much flavor). Try the same recipe with each of these to see which you like the best. A couple of ideas:

- One trick for getting good looking AND good tasting products is to blend your fat sources.
- On quick breads you can completely change the oils to applesauce.

How brown is your bottom?

Some cookies taste better crispy, some chewy...and sometimes it is a matter of taste. To ensure that you get cookies that turn out just the way that you want them – here are a few notes:

- Browned cookie sheets or pans will brown your baked goods faster. If your cookie sheets are brown, you can cover them with aluminum foil or use parchment paper to cover your pan bottom. Parchment paper also absorbs some of the extra fat, not much sticks to parchment paper (so it makes clean up easier, and it can be reused).
- When your cookies start to brown on top...they are (usually) a bit overdone.
- Check your oven temperature...it may be hotter than what the dial says.
- To prevent overdone bottoms and underdone insides – turn your dial down 25 degrees and monitor your cookies at the end (it might take 1 minute longer to cook).

Looks do count – Make your final product look its best:

Have a cookie that you know is looks and tastes great and you want to impress the judges? Dress up your display with a pretty plate, or a doily...always covering the end product with a zip lock baggie. Note that paper absorbs oil...so if your exhibit is on a paper plate – it may just leave an oil spot (not very attractive). Think, too, about the way your recipe looks – is it neat and neatly attached to your product? These little things make the difference between a blue ribbon and a purple rosette (Judge's Choice awards at State Fair).

Cooking is an art...but baking is a science – precision matters:

Did you know that your kitchen is a laboratory? It certainly is - not only can you experiment with flavors and recipes...but precision – just like in science matters – especially when you are baking. If you are following a recipe (which we highly recommend) someone has calculated exactly how much you need of key ingredients. Altering these measurements or being sloppy with your preparation is going to mean that your end product will not taste/look as it should – and you may not be able to repeat the results.

- Precise measurements, temperature, size, mixing (CAUTION: YOU CAN OVERMIX) are a key to consistent end products.

Choose Health as much as you can:

Even when you are making a treat – there are simple things that you can do to increase the nutrition (and the flavor) in your products. Here are some suggestions that will increase the nutrition but will still leave you with blue ribbon baked goods:

- Substitute ½ of white flour with whole wheat flour
- Substitute some (or all depending on the recipe) of the fats with applesauce (regular or chunky depending on recipe)
- Use smaller chocolate chips – you will get you a chip in every bite...and you tend to use less chocolate.
- Add nuts – they add good fats to your recipe and lots of flavor. Don't think you or your family likes nuts? Chop them very fine...no one will know that you are making the recipe healthier. (Just be sure to tell people that you have added nuts in case someone has a nut allergy).

Cakes Containing Fat

| Points to Consider | Common Defects | Probable Causes |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|
| Flavor – Delicate, sweet, well-blended; characteristic of ingredients | Bitter | Too much baking powder or baking soda |
| | Flat | Too little salt |
| | Unpleasant flavor | Strong or rancid shortening; poor quality eggs or flavoring |
| Appearance Shape – Level, slightly rounded top; free from cracks or peaks | Rises higher on one side | Uneven heat; oven grate not level; batter spread in pan unevenly |
| | Runs over top of pan | Too much batter in pan; oven not hot enough; too much leavening |
| | Peaked or cracked | Oven too hot; too much flour; not enough liquid; too much batter in pan; pan placed too high in oven; overmixing |
| Volume – Light in weight in proportion to size | Low | Not enough baking powder or baking soda; baked in too large a pan; wrong oven temperature; improper handling |
| | Falls | Too much shortening, baking powder, or baking soda; insufficient baking; oven door opened too soon; moved in oven too soon |
| Surface – Smooth, uniform, evenly browned | Cracked crust | Too much sugar |
| | Sticky crust | Too much sugar; insufficient baking |
| | Tough crust | Not enough shortening or sugar; too much flour; oven too hot; cake baked too long |
| | Hard crust | Oven too hot; cake baked too long |
| | Sticks to pan | Pan not properly prepared; left in pan too long |
| | Pale color | Too little sugar; too little leavening or shortening; wrong type pan; underbaked |
| | Too brown | Too much sugar; oven too hot; overbaked |
| | Crust soggy or doughy | Cake allowed to steam in pan while cooling |
| Internal Characteristics Texture – Tender, moist crumb, velvety feel to tongue, springs back when pressed lightly with finger | Tough cake | Not enough shortening, sugar, baking powder, or baking soda; too little or too much mixing; overbaking; oven too hot |
| | Dry cake | Too much flour or leavening; too little shortening, liquid, sugar; overbeaten egg whites; overbaked; baked too long at too low temperature |
| | Too light, crumbly and dry | Too much leavening; oven too hot |
| | Falls apart as it comes from pan | Too much shortening, sugar, or leavening; cake removed from pan too soon; insufficient mixing; insufficient baking |
| Grain – Fine, round, evenly distributed cells; thin cell walls; free from tunnels | Heavy and compact | Overbeaten batter; too much shortening or liquid; too little sugar or leavening; incorrect baking temperature |
| | Soggy layer or streak at bottom | Undermixing; shortening too soft; not enough leavening; too much liquid; damp flour that prevents blending; lower part of oven not hot enough |
| | Coarse grain | Too much leavening; insufficient creaming; use of liquid shortening; use of bread flour; oven too slow |
| | Large, uneven cells; thick cell walls | Too little liquid; insufficient mixing; too much shortening; too cool oven |

| | | |
|---|-----------------------|---|
| Color – Uniform; characteristic of kind of cake | Dark spots or streaks | Too much baking powder or baking soda; insufficient creaming, mixing, sifting of dry ingredients |
| | Dull color | Poor ingredients; improper mixing of ingredients |

Cakes (Foam or Containing No Fat)

| Points to Consider | Common Defects | Probable Causes |
|---|---------------------------------|---|
| Flavor – Delicate, pleasing | Too strong | Too much flavoring added |
| | Eggy flavor | Incorrect proportion of ingredients |
| Appearance Shape – Symmetrical; level or slightly rounded top | Fallen | Incorrect oven temperature; underbaked; too much sugar; sides of pan were greased; improper mixing; pan not inverted after baking |
| Surface – Even, delicate brown; cracks in crust of angel food and chiffon cakes | Too brown | Oven too hot; baked too long |
| Volume – Light in weight in proportion to size | Poor volume | Egg whites underbeaten or extremely overbeaten; overfolding; not inverting pan after baking |
| | Undersize | Wrong size pan for recipe |
| Internal Characteristics Texture – Very tender and light; feathery; resilient crumb that is slightly moist | Tough | Underbeaten egg white; overfolding; improper storage after baking; use of all-purpose flour |
| Grain – Fine, round, uniform, evenly distributed cells, thin cell walls; free from tunnels | Compact grain | Overfolding; underbeaten egg whites |
| | Coarse grain | Underfolding; too much sugar |
| Color – Even throughout; characteristic of kind of cake | Streaks | Improper folding; poor quality ingredients |
| | Soggy streak or layer at bottom | Insufficient beating of egg whites or yolks; underfolding; oven not hot enough |

Frosting

| Points to Consider | Common Defects | Probable Causes |
|--------------------|--|---|
| Creamy | Sticky; doesn't set up | Underbeating; undercooking; inaccurate measurement |
| | Dull, rough surface; cracks when cut; too hard | Overbeating; overcooking |
| | Hard, glazed surface | Overcooking; underbeating |
| | Coarse, sugary | Inaccurate measurement; stirring while cooking; beating before cool |
| | Poor chocolate flavor | Inferior chocolate or cocoa |
| Fluffy | Low volume | Underbeating |
| | Granular | Too little cream of tartar or corn syrup; underbeating |
| | Thin, smooth, shiny, sticky | Underbeating; undercooking; inaccurate measurement |
| | Hard crust | Overbeating; overcooking; inaccurate measurement |
| | Tough | Poor storage; overbeating; overcooking |
| | "Raw" taste | Insufficient cooking |

How Do Your Cookies Score?

| | Drop | Refrigerator | Rolled | Bar | Molded | Pressed |
|-------------------------|---|--|---|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| Appearance Shape | Fairly regular, slightly rounded, free from runny edge or spreading | Thin slices, uniform shape | Uniform thickness, retains shape of cutter | Uniform, well cut shape | Uniform shape | Well shaped and well defined pattern of cookie |
| Color | Even, delicate brown, free from darkened edge | Even, delicate brown, slightly darker at edges | Even, delicate brown, slightly darkened edge | Even brown | Even, delicate brown, slightly darker at edges | Delicately browned edges |
| Surface | Smooth, pebbled, or rough (characteristic of kind) | Fairly smooth | Fairly smooth, no flour visible | Thin, delicate crust | Fairly smooth | Characteristic of pattern |
| Tenderness | Tender, soft, somewhat moist | Tender, crisp, and crunchy | Tender, crisp and thin or soft and thick (depending on variety) | Tender, moist, but well baked | Tender, crisp, and crunchy | Very tender and crisp |
| Flavor | Pleasing, not unpleasant | Rich and flavorful | Pleasing, not unpleasant | Appealing, characteristic of kind | Rich and flavorful | Rich and buttery flavor |

Nutritious cookies should have a well blended flavor and be characteristic of the fruit, vegetable or nutrient booster used