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Poundcake: 16 Ounces Of Care

Although Any Number Of Things Can Make A Good Poundcake Go Bad, Modern Conveniences Increase The Chances Of Success.

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Back when both electricity and baking powder were more scientists' dream than cooks' reality, baking a poundcake separated the serious cooks from the dabblers.

The batter required laborious beating. Baking the cake in a wood-burning oven was unpredictable at best. Yet even today, without these challenges, any number of things can make a good poundcake go bad.

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Cookbook authors and bakers debate how and when to add eggs, how to measure the ingredients, how long to beat the batter, what kind of pan to use, and how long to bake the cake. The payoff is an elegantly simple cake with a velvety texture and rich, comforting flavor.

The first poundcakes were leavened with many eggs, beaten by hand for an hour or more. Then they baked for at least an hour in kitchens without air-conditioning.

Poundcakes were special-occasion cakes. They were especially big at weddings.

By the early 20th century, poundcakes were far less work because of the introduction of double-acting baking powder. Still, they retained their reputation as a rare treat.

Today poundcake is often just a memory because everyone is cutting down on fat. Herein lies the modern poundcake problem: The cake is fattening, its ingredients are expensive, and, despite modern conveniences, it's seen as temperamental.

There's no question modern poundcakes are easier than before. They're more like half-poundcakes - about half the size of the traditional cake and using about half the ingredients.

Electric mixers have made tedious hand-beating obsolete, and baking powder gives the batter an extra lift. Still, the baking of poundcakes requires a certain amount of care.

In a recent issue of Cook's magazine, writer Stephen Schmidt details poundcake-making with a precision that would qualify him for a Consumer Reports testing team.

Schmidt made 31 poundcakes before perfecting a method painfully exact, down to the number of seconds to mix the batter and the number of ounces the eggs should weigh. The flour is sprinkled in with a sieve or shaker. His final version is based very closely on a traditional recipe.

"Modern-day, smaller-in-size poundcakes are easy - with certain caveats," says Elizabeth Alston, food editor of Woman's Day magazine and author of Simply Cakes (Harper Collins, \$12.50).

Her rules of poundcakery: "Do not over mix, and do measure accurately - no pinches of this and dashes of that."

She has strict instructions for measuring the flour: Use the exact size measuring cup. Stir the flour, then spoon it into the cup, then level with a flat edge, such as the back of a knife. Don't pat the measuring cup

on the counter, and don't tamp the flour down in the cup.

Use large eggs and butter, both at room temperature; otherwise, the butter-sugar mixture will be grainy or separate, Alston says.

Alabama baker Prudence Hilburn, author of *A Treasury of Southern Baking* (Harper Perennial, \$15), offers this tip: "Just beat in the eggs completely, one at a time."

In fact, there are two options for adding eggs. Hilburn's method of adding them one at a time is the traditional way. The batter may curdle, but adding flour corrects that.

Here's an alternate method from Flo Braker's *The Simple Art of Perfect Cooking* (Morrow, 1985): "Beat all the eggs together lightly, then add the beaten mixture to the batter a teaspoon at a time, beating well after each addition.

"Dribbling the egg in a little at a time in this way creates an emulsion effect not unlike that used to make mayonnaise, and keeps air in the batter, which makes the cake moist and tender."

Southern Living magazine adds another dimension to the mixing, breaking down the amount of time to beat the butter and sugar according to the kind of mixer: five minutes for a KitchenAid, six minutes for a Sunbeam, and seven minutes for a hand-held portable.

A basic poundcake can be flavored with just about anything. Alston recalls walking past Bloomingdale's bakery in New York and seeing 14 kinds of poundcake.

Traditionally, nuts, coconut and lemon were used as flavorings for Southern poundcakes, Hilburn says. To vary the flavor, she recommends substituting different types of liquid in recipes that call for liquid.

She draws the line at adding fruit to poundcake batter, because it makes the cake too heavy.

Pan choice is partly a matter of tradition. Historically, poundcakes were made in two-piece tube pans for ease in removing the heavy cake.

Now, most experts agree you pretty much have your choice among tube pans, bundt pans, loaf pans and even spring form pans. Loaf pans and bundt pans seem to be used interchangeably in recipes, but tube pans hold more batter, so switching from tube pan to bundt or loaf pan (or vice versa) can cause problems.

Poundcakes gain much of their texture and virtually all of their flavor from fat, so trying to reduce fat in a poundcake is like letting the air out of a balloon. Many cookbook authors don't even try.

Hilburn says she has been working on using light sour cream and applesauce to replace fat in poundcakes, but she "wouldn't really call that a poundcake."

Alston recommends making angel food cake rather than trying to remake a poundcake to be low-fat. Her other concession to lower fat and fewer calories in poundcake is to forgo frosting. "I usually scrape off cake frosting anyway, to save calories."

Some poundcake recipes come with cream-cheese or other frostings, but poundcakes need subtle, if any, gilding.

Alston offers recipes for flavored whipped creams and fruit sauces to complement poundcake. Fruit sauces made from fresh or frozen fruit add little or no fat, she points out. She recommends raspberry-blueberry sauce or plum sauce.

Hilburn says caramel or chocolate sauces could be glazed or drizzled over a poundcake.

"What I really like, though," she says, "is to add a bowl of fresh fruit to a poundcake. That's a complete dessert."

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