

Piece of Cake Workshop

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When a piece of cake is desired, one first needs to have access to a cake.

1. Pound cake

Truly old-fashioned pound cake uses exactly four ingredients: butter, sugar, flour and eggs, in a 1:1:1:1 ratio. Exactly a pound of each, of course. This produces a very rich but also quite compact cake – even when you execute the recipe perfectly. While this is considered the ‘traditional’ recipe, even very old published recipes already apply variations, usually by using some milk or cream instead of part of the eggs and butter, and/or adding a rising agent. Generally, the goal of these modifications is to create a less dense result.

2. The recipe

We will be creating our cakes the old-fashioned way as well – ‘by hand’, without using any electrical appliance except for the oven. However we will not be following the traditional method to the letter, as it goes like this:

“To make a pound cake.

TAKE a pound of butter, beat it in an earthen pan with your hand one way, till it is like a fine thick cream, then have ready twelve eggs, but half the whites; beat them well, and beat them up with the sugar, and a few carraways. Beat it all well together for an hour with your hand, or a great wooden spoon, butter a pan and put it in, and then bake it an hour in a quick oven.¹”

The problem here is clearly in the ‘Beat it all well together *for an hour* with your hand ...’ part. A modern programmer’s limbs are not ready for this, not even in teams of two!

These are the instructions we will follow instead:

1. separate the eggs, and beat the yolks with

the sugar until creamy.

- 1.5 mix in de butter.
2. mix in the sieved flour in a few portions.
3. add in any desired flavorings.
4. separately, beat the egg whites with a little salt until stiff peaks form.
5. fold the egg whites in gently.
6. butter and dust a tin, and bake in a pre-heated oven for about an hour at 160 degrees Celsius.

Believe me, this is still hard enough work, especially if you are not used to beating batter by hand! Most modern recipes use a different approach, where the butter is beaten creamy with the sugar and the eggs are then added one by one, unbeaten, followed by the flour. If you have an electric hand or stand mixer, that would be an easier method because it requires only one mixing bowl, and offers less of an opportunity of messing up. When done properly, both approaches produce the same results.

All of the beating is needed to add in air bubbles into the cake, which help improve the texture of the result. In the recipe we will follow, those air bubbles are contained within the egg whites. Using the creaming method, the bubbles are wrapped in the buttercream. The tricky part about air bubbles inside the egg whites is that it is relatively easy to accidentally push them out in the fifth step above. Just in case, we will also be using self raising flour instead of plain flour.

Final adjustments: we will be using Castor sugar, which makes beating the egg yolks a little easier when compared to using granulated sugar, and a little vanilla sugar for flavoring instead of carraway seeds to account for modern taste. Oh, and will make half-pound cakes so that they will fit in the tins.

¹ Hannah Glasse, *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*, 1747

3. Ingredient list

- 4 medium eggs (at room temperature)
- 225 grams of soft butter
- 225 grams of sugar (of which 15 grams vanilla sugar)
- 225 grams of self raising flour
- a pinch of salt
- (optional flavoring)

Before starting, use a little of the butter and flour to grease and dust the tin carefully.

In baking, all ingredients should be at room temperature unless the recipe explicitly says otherwise. This requirement is not just for ease of processing: the temperature of the ingredients can have a profound effect on the outcome!

4. Flavourings

Lots of options are open to flavor your cake, and in this form of the recipe those are always added in just before the folding in of the egg whites². Here are some hints to help you:

- Do not add more than about 100–150 grams of any flavoring unless you what you really want is a pudding instead of a cake, as at some point the cake structure will become lost.

- Dried fruits need to be soaked, then dried and rolled through flour to prevent them from all dropping to the bottom.
- For the same reason, other chunky flavorings like apples or almonds need to be sliced very thinly.
- If you want to add non-trivial amounts of liquid, you will need to remove some of the butter, sugar and eggs from the recipe (or add flour) to compensate. For example, a 'pound cupcake' batter would use 125 grams of sugar and butter and only two eggs, to compensate for the extra 250ml of milk.
- If you add in sour things like lemon juice, you may need to add extra baking powder. If you do not, the acid will prevent raising.
- Dry powdered flavorings (especially cacao powder) need to be mixed with a bit of water first, to create a paste.
- Adding fresh fruit often produces cake with a non-appetizing color. Food coloring and dried fruits generally produce better results (even if it seems like cheating).

I stuck with sweet options because the goal is to create cakes that go well with coffee, but it is also possible to make semi-hearty cakes with ingredients like cheese, olives and nuts.

² Except for the vanilla sugar, which we are using for the workshop because it is easier to work with and cheaper than actual vanilla extract. If you feel that the vanilla sugar conflicts with your other flavoring, just replace it with normal Castor sugar