

ALL ABOUT CAKE INGREDIENTS

Delia describes which flours to use in cakes, the importance of keeping your eggs at room temperature, and the value of an ingredient that is absolutely free!

PLAIN FLOUR

Unless yeast is used in a recipe (eg, hot cross buns) ordinary soft flour is always best for cake recipes requiring plain flour. This has a lower protein content than strong flour, and therefore produces that finer, shorter texture suitable for cakes, biscuits and scones.

SELF-RAISING FLOUR

On those occasions when a raising agent is called for, it is usually more convenient to use self-raising flour since this has a standard amount of raising agent already added to it. From time to time a recipe might need rather more (or less) raising power, in which case plain flour plus the appropriate quantity of baking powder is used.

WHOLEWHEAT FLOUR

Nowadays most food scientists are agreed about the lack of fibre in our diet, and even the commercial giants are replacing the bran that was milled out of flour in the first place (thus we see 'bran' finding its way into countless breakfast cereals, biscuits and cakes). To meet the problem at home I find it better to switch over completely to wholewheat flour in baking. I'm delighted to report that most of my wholewheat experiments with cakes have been very successful.

BAKING POWDERS

These are normally a mixture of bicarbonate of soda and another acid-acting chemical, like cream of tartar. Very often, though, one needs far less raising power than these mixtures give – which explains why some recipes require bicarbonate of soda on its own.

FATS

Flavour-wise it is said you can't beat butter in baking. And certainly for purists that's probably true – I see one leading chain store proudly advertises 'made with all butter' on its wrappings! My own opinion is that margarine – now it has improved so much in flavour – is very good for baking, and with the advent of soft margarine and the all-in-one method of making sponges I actually hardly ever use butter for baking. Very occasionally I use lard. Fats should usually be at room temperature for cake-making. Allow 1 hour to soften butter, block margarine and lard. Soft or whipped margarine can be used straight from the fridge (although in practice I usually allow half an hour at room temperature), but it is vital that any margarine that is high in polyunsaturated fats is always used straight from the fridge.

SUGAR

I believe caster sugar is worth paying the extra for in baking (especially for sponges), since it does give a finer texture. Some people manage successfully to make granulated sugar into

caster sugar in a liquidiser and to save money, but be warned: if you over-do it you can finish up with a powdery 'icing' sugar and won't have saved anything! In wholefood cakes, soft brown sugar (or sometimes Demerara) can be used and indeed is preferable. Eggs for all cookery purposes should be at room temperature. If they are too cold or used straight from the fridge, they curdle more easily. So remember to remove from the fridge a couple of hours before beginning baking. Yes, another all-important ingredient. Air means lightness in your cakes, and to incorporate it you need a) large and roomy mixing bowls, and b) always to sift the flour, holding your sieve up high to give the flour a good airing on its way to the bowl. Careful folding with a metal spoon, which cuts cleanly into the mixture, enables you to retain the precious air incorporated at the mixing stage