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Dicing cold butter for pastry.

Butter styles

Butter contains fat, moisture, and milk solids. It browns at relatively low temperatures compared to other fats, because of the presence of these milk solids—which are also responsible for butter’s creamy taste. Butter can be unsalted or lightly salted. Unsalted grade AA butter is used in the recipes in this book. If you substitute a European-style butter, which has a slightly higher butterfat content and less moisture, in a baking recipe, you may need to add a bit more liquid.

Hydrogenation

Most shortenings and margarines contain substances known as trans fatty acids, by-products of the hydrogenation process, which turns a liquid fat such as vegetable oil into a solid. If you are concerned about “trans fats,” look for products that specify that they are free of them. In the future, all food labels will be required to show the amount of trans fats on the label along with the other nutrition information.

Opposite: Adding liquid fat; creaming butter; cutting in butter.

Butter, oils, and shortening

Fat is critical to flavor. It lingers on the palate, imbued with the flavors of a dish, allowing you to experience their richness. Some fats—namely, butter, lard, and certain oils, such as nut oils—contribute their own special flavors to baked goods. Other fats, such as vegetable oil, margarine, and shortening, are chosen specifically for their lack of flavor, to allow the flavors of other ingredients to come to the fore.

Fats also determine the texture of baked goods. Depending upon the type of fat you use in a baked good and the way it is worked into a batter or dough, the resulting texture may range from meltingly smooth to flaky and brittle. The more fat in the recipe, the softer the batter or dough. Baked goods that are made from softer batters or doughs have a tendency to spread out while they bake. The way batter spreads is important, for example, to making cookies of the right size and color. The fat in a batter or dough also helps to encourage browning on crusts and edges; this extra color translates as extra flavor on the palate. It also produces a delightful texture contrast, as the outer edges become crisper than the middle of the baked good. Finally, the fat in a baked good also improves its texture and extends its life by holding in moisture, delaying staling.

Solid fats

Some fats, including butter, shortening, margarine, and lard, are solid at room temperature. The texture of these solid fats permits them to be rubbed, cut, or creamed into a dough or a batter. Butter is made from cream and lends good flavor and flakiness to pastry or biscuits; lard, refined pork or beef fat, has a unique flavor and makes a very flaky pastry. You can substitute it in equal amounts for the shortening or butter in most pie dough recipes; it is especially good when used to make the pastry for savory dishes. Vegetable shortening is vegetable oil that has been processed (hydrogenated) to keep it solid at room temperature. Margarine is produced in a similar manner. Vegetable shortening performs the same functions as butter and lard, but it contributes relatively little flavor of its own and extraordinary flakiness.

Store solid fats such as butter or lard in the refrigerator for up to 2 months or in the freezer for 7 to 8 months. Since these ingredients tend to absorb odors easily, keep them well wrapped and away from strongly flavored cheeses, meats, or produce. Unopened shortening keeps in a cupboard for up to 1 year. Once opened, it will keep properly wrapped in a cool cupboard or in the refrigerator for 4 to 5 months. Store margarine in the refrigerator and take note of the use-by date.

Liquid fats

An oil is a pure fat that is liquid or pourable at room temperature. Some oils have a neutral flavor: canola, corn, and safflower are examples. “Vegetable oil” on a label generally indicates that a blend of oils was used. These oils keep well in a cool, dry cupboard for 5 to 6 months. Other oils—walnut, peanut, sesame, almond, and extra-virgin olive oils, for instance—have distinctive flavors. These oils are more perishable than vegetable oils and should be purchased in small quantities. Once bottles are opened, they can be held in the refrigerator. (The cold of the refrigerator may cause the oil to cloud, but this does not affect its flavor or use.) Cooking sprays made from canola and corn oils are extremely useful for coating pans lightly and evenly. Smell all opened oils before you use them and discard them if the aroma is unpleasant or rancid.

Mixing methods for fats

The mixing method used for a batter or dough often dictates the form a fat must take when it is blended with the other ingredients in a recipe. Cakes and quick breads made using the straight mixing method (page 30) require a fat in liquid form, either an oil or melted butter or shortening, which is added in alternation with the dry ingredients. This produces a baked item with a somewhat coarse texture. These baked goods are sometimes described as having a large crumb.

The creaming mixing method (page 31), used for some cookies and cakes, requires a softened solid fat such as room-temperature butter or shortening; as the fat is creamed, or beaten, air is worked into it and trapped in the batter, producing a smaller crumb and a lighter texture. Cookies, which typically call for a relatively short creaming time, are crisper and denser than cakes, which require more creaming for more added air. Cakes turn out soft, tender, and light when the fat in the batter is well creamed and emulsified throughout the entire batter. When using the creaming method, it is important to keep the butter or shortening from becoming too warm; if the fat melts, the air will be released too quickly and the baked item might turn out flat and heavy.

Blending solid fat into a dough as layers or pockets produces a flaky or crumbly texture; biscuits, scones, and pie crusts all owe their texture to this blending technique, known as the rubbing mixing method (page 32). Butter, shortening, or lard may be rubbed or cut into flour, distributing small, discrete pieces of fat throughout a dough. When these doughs are baked, the fat releases its moisture, and the puffs of steam create a crisp, flaky pastry that shatters or breaks easily.



Mudslide Cookies

**Flourless cooking spray
for greasing**

¾ cup plus 2 Tbsp cake flour

1 Tbsp baking powder

⅛ tsp salt

1 Tbsp powdered instant coffee

1 Tbsp boiling water

1 tsp vanilla extract

**7 oz unsweetened chocolate,
coarsely chopped**

**6 oz bittersweet chocolate,
coarsely chopped**

8 Tbsp (1 stick) unsalted butter

7 large eggs

2¾ cups sugar

2 cups chopped walnuts

**1½ cups bittersweet chocolate
chips**

Makes 24 large cookies

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Lightly spray cookie sheets with cooking spray or line them with parchment paper.

Sift the flour, baking powder, and salt into a bowl and set aside.

Combine the instant coffee and boiling water to make a paste. Blend in the vanilla extract.

Melt the unsweetened chocolate, chopped bittersweet chocolate, and the butter in a saucepan over low heat or in a bowl in the microwave in 15- to 20-second intervals. Gently stir to blend.

In a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, beat together the eggs, sugar, and coffee paste mixture on high speed until light in texture and thick, 6–8 minutes. Add the chocolate mixture with the machine running on medium speed. On low speed, mix in the dry ingredients until just blended. Mix in the walnuts and chocolate chips until blended. Scrape down the bowl as needed during mixing to blend evenly.

Using a ¼-cup measure as a scoop, fill it with dough, level it, and drop the dough onto a prepared cookie sheet, leaving 3–4 inches between the cookies.

In batches, bake the cookies until they are cracked on top but still slightly moist, rotating the pans as necessary to bake the cookies evenly, 14 minutes. Allow the cookies to cool slightly on the baking sheet before transferring them to wire racks to cool completely.

Mudslide cookies get their name because the batter is very soft, almost pourable. They get their rich coffee flavor from a coffee paste made by blending instant coffee with a little hot water. Instant coffee is made by either dehydrating or freeze-drying freshly brewed coffee. Instant espresso has a deeper and slightly more bitter taste than coffee. It may also be used in this recipe.

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Chocolate Éclairs

1 cup whole or low-fat milk
8 Tbsp (1 stick) unsalted butter, diced
2 Tbsp sugar
½ tsp salt
1 cup bread flour, sifted
3 large eggs
1 large egg white
1½ cups Diplomat Cream (p. 282)
2¾ cups Chocolate Glaze (p. 284), warmed

Makes 12 éclairs

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper. Combine the milk, butter, sugar, and salt in a saucepan and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to medium, add the flour all at once, and stir well. Cook, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, until the dough begins to come away from the sides of the pan, about 5 minutes.

Transfer to the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle and beat at medium speed until cooled to body temperature. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well and scraping down the bowl with a rubber spatula after each addition. Beat in the egg white.

Transfer the dough to a pastry bag with a plain round tip. Pipe the dough into 5-inch-long cylinders on the parchment-lined baking sheets about 2 inches apart.

Bake the éclairs until they are puffed and light golden brown, 20 minutes. There may be beads of moisture on the sides. Lower the oven temperature to 325°F and continue to bake until the éclairs look dry, 20 minutes more. Transfer the éclairs to wire racks and let cool completely before filling.

Pierce a hole in both ends of each cooked éclair using a skewer or chopstick. Fit a pastry bag with a ⅛-inch plain tip. Fill the pastry bag with the diplomat cream and pipe into the éclair from each end.

Dip the top of each éclair in the warm glaze, removing any excess with a small metal spatula, and transfer to a rack set over a baking sheet. Refrigerate until the glaze firms, then serve.

Note: An alternative method for filling the éclairs is to slice them in half horizontally and pipe the diplomat cream in a spiral over the base of the éclair using a plain pastry tip. Dip the top of the pastry in warm glaze, removing any excess with a small metal spatula, and place it on top of the cream. Chill to firm the glaze as directed above.

The shape of a baked éclair depends upon the shape it is given before baking. It is easiest to make a nice, round éclair using a pastry bag, but you can also drop the batter from a spoon. Use a table knife dipped in water to smooth out any tails or peaks on the surface of the éclair before it goes into the oven. To be sure that your éclairs are all about the same size, use a pencil to trace templates onto the sheets of parchment paper before you place them, pencil-marked side down, onto baking sheets.

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