

December 17, 2008

Butter Holds the Secret to Cookies That Sing

By JULIA MOSKIN

WHEN home bakers get out the mixer and the decorating sugar at this time of year, visions of perfect-edged cookies and shapely cakes dance in their heads. But too often, the reality — both for the cookie and the baker — is ragged, fallen, and fraying around the edges.

“I’ve cried many times at 2 a.m., when the cookies fall apart after all that work,” said Susan Abbott, a lawyer in Dallas who tries every Christmas to reproduce her mother’s flower-shaped lemon cookies, though she rarely bakes during the rest of the year.

“It seems that home bakers don’t always follow instructions precisely,” said Amy Scherber, the owner of Amy’s Bread stores in Manhattan (where she also makes cakes and cookies, including orange butter cookies). “And then it’s so disappointing when things don’t turn out.”

The most common mistakes made by home bakers, professionals say, have to do with the care and handling of one ingredient: butter. Creaming butter correctly, keeping butter doughs cold, and starting with fresh, good-tasting butter are vital details that professionals take for granted, and home bakers often miss.

Butter is basically an emulsion of water in fat, with some dairy solids that help hold them together. But food scientists, chefs and dairy professionals stress butter’s unique and sensitive nature the way helicopter parents dote on a gifted child.

“Butter has that razor melting point,” said Shirley O. Corriher, a food scientist and author of the recently published “BakeWise: The Hows and Whys of Successful Baking” (Scribner).

For mixing and creaming, butter should be about 65 degrees: cold to the touch but warm enough to spread. Just three degrees warmer, at 68 degrees, it begins to melt.

“Once butter is melted, it’s gone,” said Jennifer McLagan, author of the new book “Fat: An Appreciation of a Misunderstood Ingredient, With Recipes” (Ten Speed Press).

Warm butter can be rechilled and refrozen, but once the butterfat gets warm, the emulsion breaks, never to return.

For clean edges on cookies and for even baking, doughs and batters should stay cold — place them in the freezer when the mixing bowl seems to be warming up. And just before baking, cookies should be very well chilled, or even frozen hard.

Cold butter’s ability to hold air is vital to creating what pastry chefs call structure — the framework of flour, butter, sugar, eggs and leavening that makes up most baked goods.

Before Anita Chu began work on her just-published “Field Guide to Cookies” (Quirk Books), she was a Berkeley-trained structural engineer with a baking habit she couldn’t shake. One of her favorite cookies is the croq-télé, or TV snack, a chunky cookie she adapted from the Paris pastry chef Arnaud Larher. “There is no leavening to lift it, no eggs to hold it together,” she said. “It’s all about the butter.” Ms. Chu’s experience in design helped her with the demanding precision of pastry.

“Butter is like the concrete you use to pour the foundation of a building,” she said. “So it’s very important to get it right: the temperature, the texture, the aeration.”

Ms. Chu says that butter should be creamed — beaten to soften it and to incorporate air — for at least three minutes. “When you cream butter, you’re not just waiting for it to get soft, you’re beating air bubbles into it,” Ms. Chu said. When sugar is added, it makes more air pockets, she said.

And those air bubbles are all that cookies or cakes will get, Ms. Corriher said. “Baking soda and baking powder can’t make air bubbles,” she said. “They only expand the ones that are already there.”

The best way to get frozen or refrigerated butter ready for creaming is to cut it into chunks. (Never use a microwave: it will melt it, even though it will look solid.) When the butter is still cold, but takes the imprint of a finger when gently pressed, it is ready to be creamed.

When using a stand mixer, attach the paddle blade, and never go above medium speed, or the butter will heat up.

Butter’s structural abilities are most crucial in layered or “laminated” pastries like puff pastry, strudel, croissants and pie dough, where flour-coated globules of butter expand during baking, creating flat layers of pastry bathed in melted butter.

The result is almost succulent, splintering into flakes and shards with each bite. Alvin Lee, the owner of Lee Lee’s Baked Goods in Harlem, may be one of the last commercial bakers in New York producing traditional butter-dough rugelach, the Austrian-German-Jewish cookies that are like tiny strudels. Most rugelach are made with vegetable shortening, which is much cheaper and longer-lasting. Shortening behaves well at most temperatures and makes crumbly, tender doughs, but has no flavor of its own. Mr. Lee’s rugelach are buttery, magnificent, and fleeting. He says he came out of retirement, after a 30-year professional baking stint, determined to master the rugelach genre. “I couldn’t find one that I wanted to eat, with all the old Jewish and German bakeries closing,” he said. “So I had to make them myself.”

As commercial baking moves away from butter, home cooks have more choices. There are regional French butters with impeccable government credentials, English butter from

Jersey cows, yellow butter from Alpine peaks and white butter from Emilia-Romagna. (European Union export subsidies are one reason for the cornucopia.)

Standard American butter, usually made from fresh cream, is about 80 percent fat. European butters are about 82 percent, and made from slightly fermented cream. (American butters in that style, fashionable among food lovers, are often called “cultured.”)

Salted butter was long disparaged by American epicures, but the French, the global butter authorities, welcome salt. “Salt makes food taste better,” said Robert Bradley, emeritus professor of dairy science at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. “Why not butter?”

Blind tastings by Dining section staff members and others found the differences among butters, European and American, to be pronounced. Some were waxy, some nutty, some grassy. Some seemed less greasy than others. Professionals like Mr. Bradley can taste many other flavor undertones in butter, some lovely and some not, including grass, flowers, whey, old cream, malt, must and weed. Some flavor differences come from cows’ feed. Others are acquired during processing.

Overall, the European-style butters have more of a golden, warm, toasty flavor. (This is from a compound called diacetyl that develops during fermentation.) Standard American butter has a fresher flavor of milk and cream.

But quality was unpredictable. The butter with the best credentials (high in fat, from the cows used to make Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese), and the one with the most alluring packaging, were the most flavorless.

Our favorite butters were salted Kerrygold from Ireland, unsalted Kate’s Homemade Butter from Old Orchard Beach, Me., and a “limited edition” cultured butter from Organic Valley, made from May to September, when cows are outside at least part of the time, eating grass rather than feed. Butter from grass-fed cows, rich in beta carotene, is more yellow (not higher in butterfat, as many believe).

In baking, the flavor differences mostly disappear. High-fat butters can be used in traditional recipes. “You shouldn’t see much difference,” said Kim Anderson, director of the Pillsbury test kitchen, “maybe a slightly richer flavor and more tender crumb.”

Most important is that butter be well preserved. Mr. Bradley recommends wrapping butter that’s not going to be used immediately in foil, then sealing the edges with tape. Or using it quickly.

“I just went out and bought eight pounds of butter,” said Robin Olson, “and it will all be gone by next weekend.” Ms. Olson, of Gaithersburg, Md., is making six dozen cookies this week and reigns as queen of the Christmas cookie party at her Web site, [cookie-exchange.com](http://cookie-exchange.com). Her instructions for cookie swaps are widely adopted. She always calls for butter.

“I can tell a margarine cookie as soon as I bite into it,” she said. “And then I put it right down.”

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