

- » Discovering the many reasons to bake
- » Starting off confidently by getting organized and exploring baking basics
- » Looking forward to enjoying your baked creations

Chapter **1**

Bake, For Goodness' Sake!

So you've decided you want to find out how to bake? Congratulations! Perhaps you have tinkered in the kitchen but feel uncertain about what you're doing, or maybe your attempts at creating something in the oven have not been very successful. Or perhaps you just have some general questions about baking. Reading this book is a good start for getting answers to the fundamental questions that arise when you bake. Soon you'll be well on your way to becoming a better baker!

Baking is rewarding in many ways. First and most basic, it allows you to feed yourself and provides you with the ability to choose what you eat. You can give up the ammonium alginate, disodium guanylate, and guar gum you find in cake mixes. Your breads will no longer be preserved with sodium propionate. And your pies will be heptylparaben-free. Welcome to the world of butter, sugar, flour, and vanilla.

There's something deeply satisfying about taking those basic ingredients and turning them into something that everyone loves, such as cakes and cookies. Freshly baked treats say "You are special to me" to the people you share them with. And recipients feel special because you took the time to create something for them. Welcome a new neighbor with fresh bread, surprise your office workers with a crumbcake for their coffee break, or treat your children to homemade cookies.

Baking is a way to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. An afternoon spent in the kitchen baking bread or making cookies to pack in lunches for the rest of the week is a nice gift to give yourself or your family. Mixing up a batch of cookies with your children, roommates, or loved ones is a great activity that doesn't cost a lot of money and that will give you lasting memories.

Baking really is a lot of fun when you feel comfortable in the kitchen and at ease with what you're making. Unfortunately, baking can also be a source of great anxiety and frustration when you're not sure what you're doing or feel like the ingredients are staging a rebellion against you. But it's time to calm the troops. This chapter serves as the jumping-off point to the world of baking.

Knowing How to Get Started

If baking is so great, then why does it sometimes seem like it's so hard? Did you ever get a chance to practice the basics? How many bad experiences have you had in the kitchen with burned cookies or dry cakes? You can forget about all that you don't know (and perhaps your past kitchen disasters) and look toward a new horizon. You're about to equip yourself with the knowledge of how to bake.

Baking differs dramatically from other forms of cooking. It involves a kind of magic. From mixing up batters to working bread doughs firmly but gently to watching your dough rise, baking brings a spectacular feeling. Other forms of cooking are more about sustenance — feeding hunger. But baking is something special. It's both an art and a science. And the science really does count — instructions and ingredients work together to create delicious results. Wondrous aromas will waft from your kitchen, filling your home with flavors today and sweet memories tomorrow.

Sometimes it's hard to know where to start when you're trying something new. Chapters 2 through 7 are a good start. They not only help familiarize you with *what* you're baking but also explain *how* to bake. Knowing how to bake involves more than knowing how to read a recipe and following the instructions; it's also about understanding the following:

- » The variety of ingredients available
- » The roles of the various ingredients in a recipe
- » What happens when you combine certain ingredients
- » Various baking techniques

When you equip yourself with this knowledge, you'll discover how easy and fun baking can be!

Getting organized

As you set out to bake, the most important thing is to get organized. Kitchen counters are often dumping grounds for dirty dishes, yesterday's mail, car keys, or stray kitchen items that haven't been properly put away. Take the 5 minutes it takes (if that much!) to clean off the space you need. Visit Chapter 7 for more tips and ideas for organizing your baking space.



TIP

Before you crack your first egg, be sure that you have all ingredients on deck. Nothing is more frustrating than thinking you have a full box of raisins on hand and then finding that you have only half the amount you need when you go to pour them out. Read more about stocking up on staple ingredients in Chapter 2.

And one more thing: Do you know where both your beaters are for your electric mixer? Are you sure you have both the top and the sides for the springform pan you want to use? How about all the parts for your food processor? One thing I've learned over the years is that you can never be too prepared when you start to bake. Sometimes I tear my kitchen apart looking for my square pan, only to remember that I lent it to my neighbors. Or I search high and low for parts to my mixer, only to find them on the drainboard or put away in a different drawer. Have the tools you need in front of you before you start baking. Check out Chapter 3 for more details.

Finally, make friends with your oven. If you haven't paid much attention to it lately, read some helpful advice in Chapter 4 to make sure that your oven is in proper working order. No matter how good the recipes are, if your oven is off, there is little hope for baking success.

Familiarizing yourself with baking techniques

If your eyes glaze over after reading a recipe, make a quick stop at Chapter 5 to get to know the common, and not so common, baking terms and techniques. There, you discover how to zest, fold, cut in, and whip. You should be aware that sometimes cooking terms dictate the kitchen tool you use.

For example, you whip or whisk eggs with a wire whisk, you cut in butter with a pastry blender, and you fold with a rubber spatula. If a recipe uses equipment you don't have, you have time to consider alternatives or choose another recipe. So

understanding the techniques not only helps you know what to do but also lets you know whether you need a specific tool to do it properly.

Practicing and practicing some more

If you ask any professional bakers or cooks whom you respect how they acquired all their baking talent, I'm sure that you'll discover they spent a lot of time practicing their craft. The more you practice baking, the more you'll get a feel for it and the more successful you'll be.

Eventually, you'll know by the look and feel of certain foods what's going on with your dough or batter. You'll find yourself adding a pinch of this or that or kneading the dough a little more or less just because you know how it *should* feel or behave. Practice is the key to successful baking, and Part 3 is full of recipes to practice with. You'll discover what a good cake batter should look like, how bread dough should feel, and what to do if your recipes aren't turning out the way you want.

Practicing baking is lots of fun, too, because the results are usually delicious and people are always happy to participate in your experimenting. I was quite popular with family and friends as I was developing and testing the recipes for this book, so I know that you, too, will be just as popular as you try these recipes.

Enjoying What You Bake

Who doesn't get excited when a co-worker or family member bakes up a treat? Everyone is happy when homemade desserts are brought in to be shared. The reason you bake dozens of cookies or multiple loaves of bread is to share the results. There never was a baking book titled *Baking for One or Two* because baked goods are meant to be shared.

Cakes will last for days, and cookies can stick around for a week or so if stored properly. So be sure to read Chapter 17 to pick up some great tricks and hints on how to keep every last bite of pie tasting as good as the first ones.

If you want to really wow your fellow friends, turn to Chapter 18 for some easy and neat ideas to spruce up your finished product. You can find some tips on how to package your baked goods or add some extra special touches that elevate the ordinary to the extraordinary.