

WORDOFMOUTH
BLOG

How to cook perfect American pancakes

A stack of pancakes with lashings of maple syrup and strips of crispy bacon is the quintessential American breakfast



Felicity's perfect American pancakes. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

They may get confused about [how to fry an egg](#) and be blind to the delights of Marmite, baked beans and black pudding to help start the day, but in general our American cousins are Olympic-level breakfasters. Across the pond, just about anything goes, from a "[heart attack on a rack](#)" in a Deep South diner to spicy Tex Mex migas in Santa Fe. You name it, they'll have it for [breakfast](#), preferably washed down with a bottomless glass of iced water and a vat of coffee.

For me, however, the quintessential American way to start the day has to be pancakes, dripping with maple syrup and criss-crossed with brittle rashers of crispy bacon. Kids in the [Judy Blume](#) books and Steve Martin films of my childhood seemed to live on these fluffy, saucer-sized discs (along with the equally mysterious meatloaf), yet the closest we ever came to them were scotch pancakes which, even at a distance of several thousand miles, were clearly the puny European weaklings in this particular transatlantic relationship.

Perhaps things are different now: Nigella certainly claims she makes up a batch for her children's breakfast at weekends, despite admitting that it's "undeniably a supermom-with-kids breakfast cliché". But what's the best recipe for aspiring domestic deities?

Raising agents



Nigella Lawson recipe American pancakes. Photograph:

Felicity Cloake

Unlike our [Shrove Tuesday versions](#), the thicker American pancake chases an ideal of fluffy lightness – which is handy, as they always seem to come served in towering stacks, rather than sensible pairs or trios. This is generally achieved with baking powder, as in [Nigella's recipe](#), but the television show America's Test Kitchen uses bicarbonate of soda as well. This reacts with the acid in the buttermilk to produce bubbles of carbon dioxide, which make their pancakes almost ethereally light – until they're drowned in syrup anyway.

[Jamie Oliver's recipe](#), although it does include baking powder, actually relies upon a larger than usual number of eggs. The yolks are stirred into the flour and baking powder along with the milk, while the whites are whisked to stiff peaks with a pinch of salt, and then folded into the batter just before cooking. He says that "Jools goes mad for them" – but while they're undeniably light, all that egg has made them tough, and distinctly eggy in flavour. I can imagine them as a savoury dish but they're not breakfast fare for me.

Better batter with butter



Martha Stewart recipe American pancakes.

Photograph: Felicity Cloake

Milk and eggs are the most usual liquid ingredients for pancakes. Nigella, America's Test Kitchen and the popular blogger and food writer Ree Drummond all add melted butter to their mix as well, which gives their recipes a delicious richness of flavour. It's not absolutely necessary – Jamie doesn't bother – but if you're going to have a treat, then you may as well go the whole darn hog. [Martha Stewart suggests](#) you can use vegetable oil instead, but, unless you're lactose intolerant this seems a shame as it's almost completely tasteless.

[America's Test Kitchen use buttermilk](#) in place of ordinary milk, which, as previously mentioned, reacts with the bicarbonate of soda to make their pancakes gorgeously fluffy. It also imparts a subtle tanginess that's particularly welcome if the pancakes are to be served with syrup or anything else sugary sweet. (Honey and golden syrup are homegrown alternatives to the delicious north American maple stuff.)

Jamie is the only one to eschew any kind of cooking oil: the others are almost evenly split between greasing the pan with a little butter, and wiping it with a bit of oil. A tiny

bit of butter will give your pancakes a hint of crispness to contrast with their soft and fluffy interiors.

Flours: corn v wheat



Ree Drummond recipe American pancakes.

Photograph: Felicity Cloake

Everyone uses plain flour in their pancakes – everyone except the maverick Ree Drummond who, in keeping with her "Pioneer Woman" nickname, goes for a mixture of flour and cornmeal. Maize was and is a staple for many native American tribes and the settlers who followed them, and as Ree herself says, "There's not much in the world that isn't made better by cornmeal ... it takes ordinary pancakes and turns them into beautiful yellow little miracles."

Indeed, it not only gives her pancakes a glorious golden hue, which makes them look hot-diggity downhome wholesome, but also provides a far more interesting flavour and texture: the toasted exteriors have real crunch, while inside, there's a slight, but not unpleasant grittiness. I love the idea: it seems to give this all-American dish a romantic hint of the Old West, and I'm a sucker for cowboys.

Flavourings



Jamie Oliver recipe American pancakes. Photograph:

Felicity Cloake

Ree also uses vanilla essence in her recipe, which I'm not going to adopt: I want the pancakes to taste of themselves. I will be adding a little sugar though: although at the outset I imagined that, like Jamie, I might let the toppings do the talking, now I've had a little bit of experience with American pancakes I realise that this is the only way to stop yourself eating Vermont out of maple syrup every Saturday morning.

Technique and temperature



America's Test Kitchen recipe pancakes. Photograph:

Felicity Cloake

America's Test Kitchen is strict on two points. Firstly, one shouldn't overmix the batter – too much stirring nudges the gluten in the flour into life, which, along with the protein in the eggs, will push your pancakes into tough and chewy, rather than light and fluffy territory. From non-scientific, but real world experience, this is a real danger: Nigella's ingredients, blitzed in a blender, yield tougher results than the others, folded until just combined. Cooking offers few enough opportunities for laziness, so seize this one with both hands.

They also offer advice on ensuring your pan is at the optimal temperature before starting to cook: too cool, they say, and you'll end up with "pale, gummy pancakes", too hot and they'll be "dark and unevenly cooked". I'd add, always wait until your pancakes begin to look dry on top before you flip them: if you follow Nigella's advice and just wait until you see "bubbles erupting on the surface", then you'll end up with a mess. A tasty mess, true, but hardly the stuff the American Dream hinges on.

Perfect American pancakes



Felicity's perfect

American pancakes. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

That aside, it's very difficult to muck pancakes up, however rusty your qualifications as a supermom, dad, or just cook. They're quick, easy, and absolutely delicious with Marmite. Honestly.

Makes about 10

45g butter

115g plain flour

115g fine cornmeal

¼ tsp salt

2 tbsp caster sugar

1 tsp baking powder

½ tsp bicarbonate of soda

1 egg

300ml buttermilk

100ml whole milk

1. Put the oven on low to keep the pancakes warm, and cook or otherwise prepare any bacon or other accompaniments. Melt the butter and leave to cool slightly.
2. Put the flour, cornmeal, salt, sugar, baking powder and bicarbonate of soda into a mixing bowl.
3. Put the egg, buttermilk and milk into a smaller bowl and whisk to combine, then stir in 2 tbsp melted butter. Then add the contents of the bowl to the dry ingredients and mix briefly until just combined.
4. Put a heavy-based frying pan on a medium heat and brush the base with melted butter. Use a large spoon to dollop pancakes into the pan (you'll probably need to do this in at least 2 batches) and cook until they begin to look dry and bubbly on top: depending on the heat of your pan, this should take about 3 minutes. Flip over and cook the other side and cook for another couple of minutes until golden. Put into the oven to keep warm while you cook the remaining pancakes, unless you have customers ready and waiting.
5. Serve and devour immediately, while they're still hot.

Are these pancakes just like mom used to make – or a weedy British imitation? What do you top yours with, and which other American classics should we import?

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