

WORD OF MOUTH BLOG

How to make the perfect blueberry muffins

Muffins are as American as apple pie, if not more so, but do you prefer the English variety? And why did they become so massive?

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Blueberry muffins are as all-American as apple pie – in fact, if anything they're more American, born and bred in that country, unlike the immigrant apple and its medieval crust.

But things were not always thus: early American muffin recipes are strikingly similar to that unfashionably flat creature, the English muffin, and it wasn't until the late 19th century that the term came to be used for a small cake instead.

By the time of the 1886 novel What Katy Did Next, the English muffins so lauded by Dickens are dismissed by the young Ohio heroine as "a great disappointment, tough and tasteless, with a flavour about them as of scorched flannel". I loved that book as a child, but I couldn't help wondering about dear Katy's tastebuds – American muffins, in my limited experience at that point, being little more than an overblown, over-sweetened cake, dense and claggy.

Researching this, however, I discovered that the giant muffin is a recent phenomenon: according to the American Century Cookbook, "in the 70s and 80s muffin madness set

in ... [they] exploded to three or four times their normal size," and so, sadly imprisoned in plastic, in chain coffee shops and service stations around Britain, they remain.

The fact is, big or small, the only good muffin is a freshly baked muffin: they lose their bloom fast, so it's impossible to mass-produce the light fluffiness of the real thing. In this country at least, you'll just have to make your own.

Creaming v combining



Annie Bell's blueberry muffin. Photograph: Felicity

Cloake for the Guardian

There are two approaches to making a muffin: creaming the butter and sugar together, as if making a cake, and the far simpler quickbread method, which simply folds the wet ingredients into the dry ones, shoves the lot in the oven and has a cup of tea. As Annie Bell observes in her Baking Bible, the latter is "not something that comes easily to the conscientious baker who feels there must be more to it than that".

The combining method, as practised by Bell, the classic Joy of Cooking and Cook's Illustrated the New Best Recipe book, is indeed ridiculously quick, but I can't help noticing I get a slightly better rise using the creaming technique suggested by the Essential New York Times Cookbook and Thomas Keller's Bouchon Bakery book. It's not that much more work in the grand scheme of things – and beating the butter into submission first, until it has the consistency of mayonnaise, as Keller dictates, seems to give an even lighter, fluffier result.

Whichever you use, beating the liquid ingredients together well, before you finally combine them with the flour and raising agents, is vital, because overworking the batter will encourage gluten formation, which makes for a tough muffin. And that's even worse than a tough cookie.

Flour



The Jordan Marsh blueberry muffin. Photograph:

Felicity Cloake for the Guardian

That flour should, I think, be ordinary plain flour – ours tends to be lower in protein than American flours, which makes it ideal for muffin-making. Keller uses a mixture of sponge flour and plain, but the finer the flour, the less able it is to support the weight of the blueberries.

After so many bad experiences with dense, cakey muffins, I'm keen to ensure these are light and fluffy, so I have a definite preference for those recipes heavy on the raising agents. The recipe from the defunct Boston department store Jordan Marsh, printed in the New York Times Cookbook, uses 2tsp baking powder, while Cook's Illustrated chucks in a whole tablespoon, but Bouchon's combination of baking powder and bicarbonate of soda seems to give the very fluffiest results.

Fat

The Joy of Cooking, which provides no fewer than 12 recipes for muffins in its newest edition, suggests using vegetable oil rather than butter, but I miss the richness of the latter. Bell uses extra virgin olive oil, which makes hers dairy-free, but the blueberries don't have chance against its powerful grassy flavour.

Liquids



Cook's Illustrated blueberry muffin. Photograph:

Felicity Cloake for the Guardian

Cook's Illustrated notes that using fewer eggs, and increasing the liquid content

elsewhere, improves the texture of muffins, because "egg white protein [adds] structure rather than tenderness".

Milk is often deployed, as in the New York Times recipe, though the Joy of Cooking notes you can substitute cream instead. Like Cook's Illustrated I find the tangy flavour of sour cream works well with the sweetness of the fruit, adding a slight savoury note that helps to set them apart from the over-sugared confections that so often pass as muffins in this country. Texture-wise, I find their muffins a bit cakey, though: Bouchon's buttermilk versions share the same distinctive sourness, while being rather lighter.

Sugar



The Joy of Cooking's blueberry muffin. Photograph:

Felicity Cloake for the Guardian

The Joy of Cooking suggests using light brown sugar in muffins, which gives a much better flavour than the more usual white sugar. However, I really like Bouchon's granulated sugar, which adds a very moreish crunch to the top of the baked muffins. Demerara seems the obvious compromise.

They also add molasses and honey to the batter at Keller's Bouchon Bakery, making their muffins darkly delicious; the bitterness of the molasses is as welcome as the sourness of the buttermilk, but, like Bell's extra virgin olive oil, it does hide the flavour of the fruit.

Resting the mixture



Bouchon blueberry muffin. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

for the Guardian

The molasses aren't the end of it: Bouchon also flies in the face of muffin-making convention with its claim that "the key to making a great muffin is letting the batter rest, to allow the flour to hydrate". The bakery suggests a gap of between 12 and 36 hours before baking: I rest mine for 24, but to be honest, although the results are really, really nice, they're not so outstandingly superior to the New York Times version to warrant such delay. You can make the batter the night before, and get it out of the fridge for breakfast if you want, but it's definitely not compulsory

Blueberries and the rest

Most American recipes call for wild blueberries, citing their lower water content and superior flavour. I have no luck in finding such things in this country in February, frozen or otherwise, but I'd advise seeking out the smallest fruit you can find, for a more intense blueberry hit.

Using the fruit frozen, as Cook's Illustrated and Bouchon suggest, prevents it from bleeding too much into the muffin mixture – and tossing the berries in a little flour beforehand will help stop them sinking to the bottom during baking.

I'm also going to add a few mashed fresh blueberries to the batter, as the New York Times recipe suggests – the extra liquid is evenly distributed throughout the batter, so it doesn't create soggy pockets of fruit pulp, and it adds an extra hit of blueberry flavour to every bite, which I prefer to the Joy of Cooking's nutmeg, Bouchon's vanilla paste or Bell's orange zest. I'd suggest either buying fresh fruit and freezing half overnight before use, or buying frozen and defrosting half – there's no need to buy two lots.

Finally, dotting a few berries on top before baking, as Bell suggests, makes the muffins look more attractive: the fruit's natural inclination is to sink, so this ensures that there will still be something to see, however high the batter rises. Not that you'll need any extra persuasion to tuck in ...

The perfect blueberry muffins



Felicity Cloake's

perfect blueberry muffin. Photograph: Felicity Cloake for the Guardian

Makes nine muffins

75g frozen blueberries

75g fresh blueberries

240g plain flour, plus a little extra

110g butter, softened

200g demerara sugar

1 egg, beaten

1tsp baking powder

1tsp bicarbonate of soda

½tsp salt (optional)

240ml buttermilk

Preheat the oven to 190C/gas mark 5 and line a muffin tin with nine papers. Toss the frozen blueberries with a little flour and put back in the freezer. Crush the fresh blueberries with a fork.

Beat the butter in a food mixer until it is very soft – about the consistency of mayonnaise. (You may need to warm the bowl in a pan of hot water first if your butter is still quite hard.)

Beat in the sugar, then the beaten egg, and mix until well combined. Stir in the mashed blueberries.

Sift together the flour, baking powder, bicarbonate of soda, and ½tsp salt if using, in a separate bowl and mix well.

Fold half these ingredients into the mix, then half the buttermilk, then the remaining

flour and buttermilk. Fold in half the frozen blueberries and mix until just combined, but do not overwork.

Spoon into the prepared tin, dot the remaining frozen blueberries on top and bake for about 25-30 minutes until risen and golden. Allow to cool slightly before serving, but these don't keep well, so don't wait too long!

So who makes muffins better, us or the Americans? What are your favourite flavours (I'd be particularly interested in any savoury or corn versions) – and why did they suddenly super-size?

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