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Quick Breads

While baking yeast bread may be intimidating to some people, there are some “quick” options to get you started in the kitchen. Muffins, coffeecakes, scones, waffles, and pancakes are all breads that can be made in a short period of time and with very little effort. The difference between yeast breads and quick breads is the leavening agent. Yeast is a living cell that multiplies rapidly when given the proper food, moisture, and warmth. It must “proof”, or rise, to allow the production of carbon dioxide that allows the bread to rise during baking. Quick breads use the chemical leavening agents of baking powder and/or baking soda. Baking powder and baking soda do not require time for rising, so the batter for quick bread is cooked immediately after mixing. The best thing about quick breads is that the options are limitless when it comes to ingredients. The limiting factor in good quick breads is the correct mixing. Over mixing or under mixing will result in a poor quality product.

BASIC INGREDIENTS

Different quick bread batters are created by varying the ingredients and combining them in a certain way to form the structure of the bread. The possibilities are endless, but the common factor is the basic ingredients of fat, sugar, eggs, flour, liquid, leavening agent, and a flavoring ingredient. The flavoring might be a fruit or vegetable, a liquid such as buttermilk or fruit juice, an extract, herbs, or spices. Depending how the ingredients are mixed together will determine the texture and quality.

FAT

Shortening, butter, margarine, and oil are all considered fats and can be used in quick breads depending on the desired texture. In addition to adding flavor and moisture, fat combines with sugar during “creaming”, to add lightness by trapping air that expands during baking. This lightness makes the quick bread tender, forming a finer grain in the baked quick bread. To reduce calories, you can reduce one-half to all of the fat by using fruit or vegetable purees in place of the fat.

SUGAR

Sugar adds sweetness and flavor but also aids in browning, tenderizing, keeping the final quick bread moist, and acting as a preservative to increase the shelf life. Sugar acts as a tenderizer by absorbing water and inhibiting flour gluten development and by incorporating air into shortening during the creaming process. It caramelizes under heat, providing quick breads with a pleasing color and aroma. You can reduce the amount of sugar in the recipe by one-third to one-half with little change in texture. Adding dried fruits, spices, or extracts will help to replace some of the sweetness, if you leave out one-half of the sugar.

EGGS

Eggs provide structure and help bind the ingredients together. Eggs also act as an emulsifier.

By surrounding small particles of fat, the egg helps make the quick bread batter smoother, thus contributing to volume and texture. In addition, when eggs are beaten, they incorporate tiny air bubbles that expand with heat in the oven, contributing to volume. Eggs should be left at room temperature for about 30 minutes, as more air can be incorporated during mixing. Eggs also add moisture, color, flavor, and nutritional value. Generally, recipes call for large eggs.

LIQUID

The most common liquid ingredients in quick breads are milk and water. The liquid moistens the batter, helps activate the gluten in the flour, and dissolves the sugar in the recipe.

FLOUR

Although the structure of quick breads is affected by the flour used in your recipe, a more tender bread is made when little gluten development occurs. Some gluten is needed so that the bread will rise quickly. Most modern day recipes call for all-purpose flour. Self-rising flour may also be used in recipes, but because it has added baking powder and salt, these ingredients must be eliminated from the original recipe.

BAKING POWDER AND SODA

Baking powder is a mixture of baking soda plus an acid. Most consumers use double-acting baking powder. It contains a fast-acting acid that reacts with the moisture in the recipe and a slow-acting baking powder that reacts with the addition of heat. If moisture is present, the acid (cream of tartar, lemon juice, and buttermilk are examples of an acid) reacts, causing the release of carbon dioxide, which causes cake to rise. Too much leavening agent will cause air bubbles to be too big. They combine and burst, leading to a flat cake. Too little leavening agent will lead to a heavy cake. To make your own baking powder, you can substitute $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of baking soda and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of cream of tartar for every teaspoon of baking powder.

SALT

Salt is used in quick breads to enhance the flavor of the other ingredients. There is not a specific ratio for home baking, and the recipe may need to be adjusted if salted butter is used. Leaving the salt out completely will leave your bread tasting bland.

SPICES, FLAVORINGS, EXTRACTS, AND OPTIONALS

Spices, flavorings, and extracts add flavor and interest to quick breads. Usually these ingredients are added in small amounts. If adding nuts, raisins, or chopped fruits, toss them in flour first. This helps prevent them from sinking to the bottom of the pan. Also, dried fruit can be soaked first for about ten minutes to add extra sweetness to the baked bread.

TYPE OF BATTERS

There are three types of quick bread batters. Pour batters are usually those with a thick liquid consistency. These are appropriate for pancakes, waffles, and funnel cakes. Drop batters are much thicker and need to be pushed out of the bowl with a spatula. These include muffins, tea loaves, nut breads, corn bread, and coffee cakes. Lastly, the quick bread may be a dough that is dry enough to be kneaded slightly, rolled, and cut into shapes. Biscuits and sticky buns are usually made with a dough.

MIXING

The key to making moist and tender quick breads is proper mixing. The first step is thorough mixing of all the dry ingredients or just stirring. In a separate bowl, the eggs, sugar, and fat should be mixed according to the recipe. Any remaining ingredients such as fruit, nuts, or vegetables should be added to the bowl of wet ingredients. At this point the dry ingredients can be poured into the wet ingredients. The dry mixture should be folded gently just until the dry ingredients are moistened. The batter should be lumpy.

Sometimes the recipe calls for the fat and sugar to be creamed together first, until a fluffy texture and light color is obtained. Then the remaining ingredients are added and stirred together as described above. As the bread bakes, trapped carbon dioxide, along with the production of steam, allows the bread to rise.

To obtain the desired appearance, the mixing has to be done properly. If the batter is under mixed, the bread will rise insufficiently. If the batter is over mixed, too much air will be incorporated, and large holes or tunnels will form during baking. Either way, you'll be disappointed with the results; follow the recipe instructions for the desired texture.

EQUIPMENT

There are many choices when it comes to choosing a pan to bake your bread — from metal to glass, from round to square, from small to large. Shiny pans are recommended because they reflect the heat away from the bread to make a light brown crust. A nonstick pan will require you to reduce the baking temperature by 25°F because nonstick pans absorb heat, causing the bread to bake and brown quicker.

Following the pan size on your recipe will help insure you have the best quality product. If you use a pan that is too big, the bread will be flat and dry. If you use a pan that is too small, the bread will bulge with a rounded top or overflow the pan. Most pans include the size on the bottom of the pan, but you can measure it yourself using a ruler. Muffin tins are often used. These should be greased generously using a baking spray or shortening. You may also use paper or silicone baking cups. The batter should fill approximately two-thirds of the muffin tin, to allow room for the batter to expand. If you don't have enough batter to fill all the tins, place a teaspoon of water in each of the empty tins.

OVEN TEMPERATURE

Before mixing, the oven should be preheated to the correct temperature. The temperature will affect the appearance and the moisture of the quick bread. An oven that is too hot will cause the edges to brown before the middle is completely done. If the suggested oven temperature does not provide the optimal product, try using an oven thermometer to determine if the oven is running too low or high.

BAKING

Bake your quick breads in the center of the oven. Check for doneness about 7 minutes before the recipe directions call for it to be finished. To check for doneness, the center should be checked using a toothpick. If the toothpick is clean or comes out with just a few crumbs from the center of the bread, the bread is done. A coated toothpick means the bread requires more baking; check about every 2 minutes until the bread is done.

COOLING

When baking is done, the bread should be cooled for a minute or two before removing it from the pan and placing on a wire rack.

STORING

Quick breads should be completely cooled before storing. If the bread is going to be used within the next few days, simply label it and seal it in an airtight container to retain the bread's moisture. Most quick breads can be left at room temperature and still maintain their freshness. Keep in mind that if the bread contains added fruits, sour cream, yogurt, cheese, or other highly perishable products, the bread should be refrigerated for safety reasons. If the bread will not be used within a week, wrap the bread in an airtight container and freeze it until time of use. The bread should be set out for 1½ hours at room temperature to thaw before needed.

NUTRITIONAL VALUE

The ingredients found in the largest amounts in quick breads are flour, sugar, and fat. These ingredients will provide calories but very little essential nutrients. Combined with a glass of milk, a serving of fruit, or by themselves, quick breads can be enjoyed as part of a healthful diet.

EVALUATION

Besides flavor, quick breads are usually judged based on appearance, texture, and moistness. A loaf or muffin should have straight sides and a rounded top. The exterior should be a golden brown, free of peaks. Often quick breads will bake with a break in the top. This is common, as the top of the bread may set before the bread is finished rising in the oven. It is not appropriate for muffins to crack or be misshapen. Biscuits should be twice as high as the original size. Quick breads should have an interior that has even, small air cells, rather than large air cells, which is referred to as tunneling. Biscuits should be flaky with medium-fine, even air cells. The quick bread should be tender and moist, with a pleasing and well-blended flavor. Remember that proper mixing is very important in quick breads. If the batter is under mixed, the bread will rise insufficiently. If the batter is over mixed, too much air will be incorporated, and large holes or tunnels will form during baking.

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