

# The Best Chocolate Bundt Cake

Tired of great-looking chocolate Bundt cakes that are bland and boring? So were we. Our ideal cake would be moist, rich with chocolate flavor, and attractive.

BY ERIKA BRUCE

With its decorative shape, a Bundt cake doesn't require any frosting or fussy finishing touches to look impressive. What chocolate Bundt cakes do require, it turns out, is a major boost in flavor. Despite their tantalizing looks, most of these cakes have at best a muted chocolate presence. I wanted a cake that would deliver that moment of pure chocolate ecstasy when the first bite stops time. A chocolate Bundt cake should taste as good as it looks, with a fine crumb, moist texture, and rich chocolate flavor.

Unfortunately, these sweet masters of disguise disappointed my tasters and me so often in my initial taste tests that I almost relegated this recipe to the dustbin (along with all the failed cakes). Moist but pale, many of the cakes were indeed devoid of chocolate flavor. Others looked appealingly dark and mysterious but managed to capture only flat, bitter nuances of chocolate. An overly sweet, walnut-studded fudgy cake with a gummy, underbaked center was hardly worth eating. A cake similar to a pound cake had great texture—dense and moist owing to the addition of sour cream—but the only thing that told tasters it was chocolate was its brown color. Not much flavor there, either.

## Searching for Chocolate Flavor

Because the pound cake made with sour cream had come closest to my textural ideal, I started with a working recipe using roughly the same proportions of butter, sugar, eggs, and flour and employing the traditional method of creaming the butter and sugar before adding the other ingredients. I then focused on boosting the nonexistent chocolate flavor. The original recipe included a small amount of cocoa powder, so I thought that a good dose of melted chocolate would be in order. I started with baking, or unsweetened, chocolate, which has the most intense flavor. The resulting cake tasted bitter and its texture was chalky, reminiscent of third-rate brownies. Trying semisweet and bittersweet chocolate in subsequent tests, I noticed an improvement in texture, as both of these chocolates have added sugar and stabilizers that make them smoother and



We offset the decadent chocolate flavor of this Bundt cake with sour cream.

creamier. Although the texture was better, tasters found the cake made with the semisweet chocolate too sweet; bittersweet added just the right chocolate edge.

Now my cake had more chocolate flavor, but, being finicky about my chocolate desserts, I wasn't satisfied. I wanted even deeper, more complex flavor. This time more cocoa powder seemed like a logical addition to ramp up the amount of chocolate flavor, so I replaced a portion of the flour in my recipe with an equal amount of cocoa powder. I had to choose between Dutch-processed cocoa powder and natural cocoa powder. Dutch-processed cocoa powder is alkalized—treated to reduce acidity—and is thought by some to provide a smoother chocolate flavor along with an intense dark color. However, tasters preferred the cakes I made with unsweetened natural cocoa powder. Its assertive flavor with fruity undertones stood up better to the sour cream; cakes made with Dutched cocoa also rose slightly less.

But I found the real trick to developing this cake's chocolate flavor when I tried a technique that

the test kitchen had developed for devil's food cake. I poured boiling water over the cocoa and chocolate to dissolve them, a step that not only helps disperse the cocoa particles throughout the batter but also helps bloom the flavor.

## Finishing Texture and Flavor

My cake now had great, complex chocolate flavor, but I also had a new problem: The cake was too dry. To remedy this, I first tried decreasing the flour by  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup, which made the cake more moist but still not moist enough. Since I could not remove more flour without compromising the cake's structure, I tried increasing the amount of butter, but this merely made the cake greasy. I added an extra egg (most recipes call for four; I went up to five), which helped. Finally, I switched from granulated to light brown sugar, which is better able to hold on to moisture. The brown sugar not only added moisture but also dramatically improved flavor.

But even after making all these amendments to the recipe, I was still falling short of my goal of a really moist cake. Sour cream had helped contribute moisture, so I reviewed the amount I was

adding. When I increased it, the cake became greasy and too acidic. Decreasing it made the cake less rich and tougher. I went back to my original recipes and found that many of them used either milk or buttermilk, which have a higher water content than sour cream. This discovery tipped me off to a simple way to solve the problem: increasing the amount of boiling water added with the cocoa powder and chocolate. The resulting batter was looser, and the baked cake was perfectly moist.

To finish the recipe, I dissolved a small amount of espresso powder along with the chocolate and cocoa and added a healthy tablespoon of vanilla extract. Both flavors complemented the floral nuances of the chocolate. With the right pan and a ready batter, I tried baking my cake at 325, 350, and 375 degrees. At the higher temperature, the cake developed a thick upper crust and an uneven crumb. Finding little difference in the cakes baked at the other two temperatures, I opted for the quicker baking time at 350 degrees. (The beauty of the Bundt pan's design is the handy hole



## TECHNIQUE

### ENSURING AN EASY RELEASE



A Bundt cake is attractive only if you are able to get it out of the pan in one piece. For this reason, proper pan preparation is vital. A simple paste made from melted butter and cocoa powder and painted into the grooves of the pan with a pastry brush worked wonders in ensuring that our cake released cleanly. We much preferred this method to greasing and flouring, which left an unsightly pasty white film on the cake's exterior.

in the center, which allows thick batters to bake more quickly.) Sprinkled with confectioners' sugar, this cake was perfect for a casual dessert. For a more formal presentation, I added lightly sweetened berries and a dollop of whipped cream to each slice, thereby creating a complete and deeply satisfying chocolate dessert. At long last, I had reached chocolate heaven.

### CHOCOLATE SOUR CREAM BUNDT CAKE

SERVES 12

We prefer natural (or regular) cocoa here since Dutch-processed cocoa will result in a compromised rise. The test kitchen's favorite natural cocoa is Hershey's Natural Unsweetened Cocoa, and our favorite instant espresso powder is Caffè D'Vita Imported Premium Instant Espresso. We prefer to coat the pan with a paste made from cocoa and melted butter, which ensures a clean release. For an accurate measurement of boiling water, bring a full kettle of water to a boil and then measure out the desired amount. The cake can be served with just a dusting of confectioners' sugar, but it can also be made more impressive with Lightly Sweetened Raspberries (recipe follows) and whipped cream, if desired.

- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup ( $2\frac{1}{4}$  ounces) unsweetened cocoa powder, plus 1 tablespoon for pan
- 12 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened, plus 1 tablespoon melted for pan
- 6 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped
- 1 teaspoon instant espresso powder (optional)

## TESTING Bundt Pans

Bundt pans were introduced by Nordic Ware in the 1950s, based on the traditional cast-iron *kugelhopf* molds of Eastern Europe. But the pan didn't truly start to become popular until 1966, when a chocolate Bundt cake called the Tunnel of Fudge took second place in the Pillsbury Bake-Off. Today, Bundt pans are a common sight in many kitchens.

We wanted to find the best Bundt pan, so we bought seven 11- to 15-cup nonstick pans priced from about \$9 to about \$31 and used them to make our Classic Yellow Bundt Cake.

We were pleased to learn that all the Bundt pans made excellent, consistently browned cakes. Pans with dark interiors produced cakes that were a slightly deeper brown but were still entirely acceptable. Better still, all the pans released the cakes equally well, with no sticking. In the end, it was the design of each pan that mattered most—and specifically how that design affected ease of use and cake appearance. We preferred pans with handles, which made them easier to maneuver while greasing them, removing them from the oven, and turning out cakes. And we liked pans that had sharp, well-defined ridges because they produced more attractive, impressive-looking cakes than pans with gentle waves or fluting. As in our last testing, the Nordic Ware Anniversary Bundt Pan reigned supreme.

## HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

### NORDIC WARE Anniversary Bundt Pan

MODEL: 50037

PRICE: \$30.99

COMMENTS: The biggest model in our testing, our winner also had large handles, making it easy to grip, maneuver, and flip. And it had the deepest, most well-defined ridges, producing the most eye-catching cakes in our tests.



- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup boiling water
- 1 cup sour cream, room temperature
- 1  $\frac{3}{4}$  cups ( $8\frac{3}{4}$  ounces) all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 2 cups packed (14 ounces) light brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- 5 large eggs, room temperature
- Confectioners' sugar

1. Mix 1 tablespoon cocoa and melted butter into paste. Using pastry brush, thoroughly coat interior of 12-cup Bundt pan. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees.

2. Combine chocolate; espresso powder, if using; and remaining  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup cocoa in medium heatproof bowl. Pour boiling water over mixture and let sit, covered, for 5 minutes. Whisk mixture gently until smooth. Let cool completely, then whisk in sour cream. Whisk flour, salt, and baking soda in second bowl to combine.

3. Using stand mixer fitted with paddle, beat softened butter, brown sugar, and vanilla on medium-high speed until pale and fluffy, about 3 minutes. Add eggs, one at a time, and beat until combined. Reduce speed to low and add flour mixture in 3 additions, alternating with chocolate-sour cream mixture in 2 additions, scraping down bowl as needed. Give batter final stir by hand.

4. Transfer batter to prepared pan and smooth top with rubber spatula. Bake cake until skewer inserted in center comes out with few crumbs attached, 45 to 50 minutes, rotating pan halfway through baking. Let cake cool in pan for 10 minutes, then invert cake onto wire rack; let cool completely, about 3 hours. (Cooled cake can be wrapped in plastic wrap and stored at room temperature for up to 24 hours.)

5. Dust cake with confectioners' sugar, transfer to platter, and serve.

## LIGHTLY SWEETENED RASPBERRIES

MAKES 3 CUPS

The sweetness of the raspberries will vary, so start with 1 tablespoon of sugar and then add more to taste. Do not use frozen raspberries here.

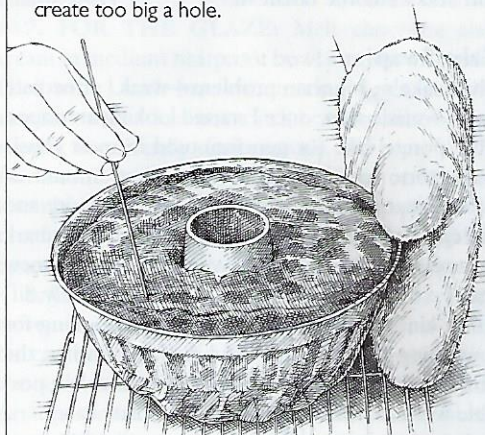
- 15 ounces (3 cups) raspberries
- 1–2 tablespoons sugar

Gently toss raspberries with sugar, then let stand until berries have released some juice and sugar has dissolved, about 15 minutes.

## TECHNIQUE

### TESTING FOR DONENESS

When testing an especially deep or thick cake, a toothpick won't be long enough, and a knife will create too big a hole.



Stick a skewer deep into the center of the cake and remove. If the skewer is covered with moist batter, the cake needs more time in the oven.