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The Art of Biscuit-Making

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Written: May 1993

Biscuits can be soft and fluffy or flaky and high-rising. Each type requires surprisingly different ingredients and techniques.

The Problem: Contrary to popular belief, all biscuits are not created equal. There are, in fact, different types of biscuits, each with its own heavenly attributes. More often than not, though, all biscuits are made the same and disappoint in exactly the same way.

The Goal: Our goal was twofold: to identify the distinct differences between fluffy biscuits and flaky biscuits and to understand how specific ingredients, mixing technique, dough shaping, and baking combine to create a perfect fluffy or flaky biscuit.

The Solution: Indeed, there are fine points to biscuit making, but the whole process begins with the answer to this simple question: What kind of biscuit do you like best? Soft and fluffy or flaky and tall? After that, there is a specific recipe and technique that will render the desired outcome--not just one time, but time after time.

Fluffy Biscuits [Add to Favorites](#) [Shopping List](#)

If you are using yogurt instead of buttermilk in this recipe, note that 8 ounces of yogurt equals 3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons (7/8 cup), not 1 cup as you might expect. Make sure that your oven rack is set at the center position. Baked too low, your biscuits will likely end up with burned bottoms. If your oven is accurate, stick with the 450° suggested temperature. If you suspect your oven runs hot, lower the temperature to 425°. Makes 1 dozen

- 1 cup [unbleached all-purpose flour](#)
- 1 cup plain cake flour
- 2 teaspoons [baking powder](#)
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon granulated sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon [table salt](#)
- 1/4 pound [unsalted butter](#) *chilled, cut into 1/4-inch cubes*
- 2 tablespoons [unsalted butter](#) , *melted*
- 3/4 cup [buttermilk](#) *or 3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons low-fat or whole-milk plain yogurt*
- 2 - 3 tablespoons [buttermilk](#) *additional (or milk), if needed*

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1. Set rack at middle position and heat the oven to 450°.
2. Mix or pulse first 6 ingredients in a large bowl or the workbowl of a food processor fitted with steel blade. With your fingertips, a pastry blender, 2 knives, or steel blade of the food processor, mix, cut, or process butter into the dry ingredients until mixture resembles coarse meal with a few slightly larger butter lumps.
3. If making by hand, stir in buttermilk with a rubber spatula or fork until mixture forms into soft, slightly sticky ball. If dough feels firm and dry bits are not gathering into a ball, sprinkle dough clumps with additional tablespoon of buttermilk (or milk for the yogurt dough). Be careful not to overmix. If using food processor, pulse until dough gathers into moist clumps. Remove from food processor bowl and form into rough ball.
4. With lightly floured hands, divide dough into 12 equal portions. Lightly bat a portion of dough back and forth a few times between floured hands until it begins to form a ball, then pat lightly with cupped hands to form a rough ball (see illustration below). Repeat with remaining dough, placing formed dough rounds 1 inch apart on ungreased cookie sheet or pizza pan. Brush dough tops with melted butter or milk. (May be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 2 hours.) Bake until biscuit tops are light brown, 10 to 12 minutes. Serve immediately.

STEP BY STEP: Rolling Biscuit Dough



Fluffy biscuit dough is too soft to roll and cut easily, so it is best formed by gently batting back and forth, then patting lightly with cupped hands.

Flaky Biscuits [Add to Favorites](#) [Shopping List](#)

After stirring in the milk, this dough should feel very soft and moist, but you should be able to hold it briefly between lightly floured hands without its sticking. If it turns out wet and sticky, return it to the bowl and sprinkle it with 2 to 4 tablespoons additional flour (of any kind) on all sides, gently patting in the flour with your palm. Let the dough rest another half-minute before removing it to your work surface. It is best to discard the dough that is left over from the second cutting, as biscuits made with thrice-recycled dough tend to be tough and flat. These biscuits are best served at once, though leftovers may be wrapped and refrigerated for a day, then reheated for a few minutes in a 350° oven.

Makes 16

- 2 cups [unbleached all-purpose flour](#) (preferably King Arthur)
- 1 tablespoon [baking powder](#)
- 3/4 teaspoon [table salt](#)
- 5 tablespoons [unsalted butter](#), chilled, cut into 1/4-inch cubes
- 2 tablespoons [unsalted butter](#), melted
- 3 tablespoons vegetable shortening, chilled, or lard
- 3/4 cup [milk](#), cold

1. Adjust rack to center position and heat oven to 450°.
2. Mix first 3 ingredients in a large bowl or the workbowl of a food processor fitted with steel blade. Add butter; with your fingertips, a pastry blender, 2 knives, or steel blade of a food processor, mix, cut, or process butter and shortening into dry ingredients, until the mixture resembles dry oatmeal. (Transfer food processor mixture to a large bowl.)
3. Stir in milk with a rubber spatula or fork until dry ingredients are just moistened. Let dough rest for 1 minute, then transfer it to a well-floured work surface.
4. Roll the dough into a rough 6-by-10-inch rectangle. With the long edge of the dough facing you, fold in both short ends of the dough so that they meet in the center; then fold the dough in half by width, forming a package of dough four layers thick. Once again, roll the dough into a 6-by-10-inch rectangle 1/2-inch thick.
5. Using a lightly greased and floured 2-inch cutter, stamp, with one decisive punch per round, 4 rows of 3 dough rounds, cutting them close together to generate as few scraps as possible. Dip cutter into flour before each new cut. Push the scraps of dough together so that their edges join; firmly pinch the edges with fingertips to make a partial seal. Pat the dough into small rectangle, fold it as before, and re-roll 1/2-inch thick. Cut out 3 or 4 more biscuits.
6. Place dough rounds 1 1/2 inches apart on an ungreased baking sheet; brush dough tops with melted butter or milk. (May be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated up to 3 hours.)

7. Bake until biscuits are lightly browned, 10 to 12 minutes. Serve immediately.

STEP BY STEP: Shaping Flaky Biscuits



1. Roll the dough into a rough rectangle using as light a touch as possible on the rolling pin. Proceed directly to cutting, or follow steps 2, 3, and 4.



2. For extra-flaky biscuits, after you have rolled the dough into a rectangle, fold in both short ends to meet in the center.



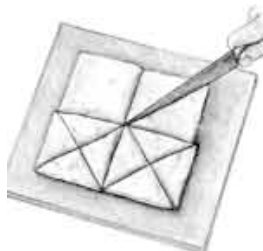
3. Next, fold the dough in half by width, and you are ready to roll again before cutting.



4. For an extra-precise effect, turn the dough onto a lightly floured eight-inch square pan, pat to fill the contours of the pan completely, then unmold.



5. To make 16 square biscuits, cut the dough into four strips, then cut each strip into four equal pieces.



6. To make 16 triangular biscuits, cut the dough into quarters, then cut each quarter diagonally into four.

Cheddar Biscuits [Add to Favorites](#) [Shopping List](#)

If you are using yogurt instead of buttermilk in this recipe, note that 8 ounces of yogurt equals 3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons (7/8 cup), not 1 cup as you might expect. Make sure that your oven rack is set at the center position. Baked too low, your biscuits will likely end up with burned bottoms. If your oven is accurate, stick with the 450° suggested temperature. If you suspect your oven runs hot, lower the temperature to 425°.

Makes 1 dozen

- 1 cup [unbleached all-purpose flour](#)
- 1 cup plain cake flour
- 2 teaspoons [baking powder](#)
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon granulated sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon [table salt](#)
- 5 tablespoons [unsalted butter](#), chilled, cut into 1/4-inch cubes, plus 2 tablespoons melted
- 1 cup [extra-sharp cheddar cheese](#), shredded (4 ounces)
- 3/4 cup [buttermilk](#) or 3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons low-fat or whole-milk plain yogurt
- 2 - 3 tablespoons [buttermilk](#), or milk, if needed

1. Set rack at middle position and heat the oven to 450°.
2. Mix or pulse first 6 ingredients in a large bowl or the workbowl of a food processor fitted with steel blade. With your fingertips, a pastry blender, 2 knives, or steel blade of the food processor, mix, cut, or process butter into the dry ingredients until mixture resembles coarse meal with a few slightly larger butter lumps. Add shredded cheddar and toss lightly to distribute.
3. If making by hand, stir in buttermilk with a rubber spatula or fork until mixture forms into soft, slightly sticky ball. If dough feels firm and dry bits are not gathering into a ball, sprinkle dough clumps with additional tablespoon of buttermilk (or milk for the yogurt dough). Be careful not to overmix. If using food processor, pulse until dough gathers into moist clumps. Remove from food processor bowl and form into rough ball.
4. With lightly floured hands, divide dough into 12 equal portions. Lightly bat a portion of dough back and forth a few times between floured hands until it begins to form a ball, then pat lightly with cupped hands to form a rough ball. Repeat with remaining dough, placing formed dough rounds 1 inch apart on ungreased cookie sheet or pizza pan. Brush dough tops with melted butter or milk. (May be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 2 hours.) Bake until biscuit tops are light brown, 10 to 12 minutes. Serve immediately.

STEP BY STEP: Rolling Biscuit Dough



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Herb Biscuits [Add to Favorites](#) [Shopping List](#)

If you are using yogurt instead of buttermilk in this recipe, note that 8 ounces of yogurt equals 3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons (7/8 cup), not 1 cup as you might expect. Make sure that your oven rack is set at the center position. Baked too low, your biscuits will likely end up with burned bottoms. If your oven is accurate, stick with the 450° suggested temperature. If you suspect your oven runs hot, lower the temperature to 425°. Split these and use them as a base for rich scrambled eggs or creamed chicken or seafood, or serve them as biscuits plain and simple.

Makes 1 dozen

- 1 cup [unbleached all-purpose flour](#)
- 1 cup plain cake flour
- 2 teaspoons [baking powder](#)
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon granulated sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon [table salt](#)
- 1/4 pound [unsalted butter](#), chilled, cut into 1/4-inch cubes, plus 2 tablespoons melted
- 3 tablespoons [minced fresh parsley leaves](#) or 2 tablespoons minced parsley and 1 tablespoon either minced fresh tarragon or dill
- 3/4 cup [buttermilk](#) or 3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons low-fat or whole-milk plain yogurt
- 2 - 3 tablespoons [buttermilk](#) additional (or milk), if needed

1. Set rack at middle position and heat the oven to 450°.
2. Mix or pulse first 6 ingredients in a large bowl or the workbowl of a food processor fitted with steel blade. With your fingertips, a pastry blender, 2 knives, or steel blade of the food processor, mix, cut, or process butter into the dry ingredients until mixture resembles coarse meal with a few slightly larger butter lumps. Add the fresh herb(s) of choice and toss lightly to distribute.
3. If making by hand, stir in buttermilk with a rubber spatula or fork until mixture forms into soft, slightly sticky ball. If dough feels firm and dry bits are not gathering into a ball, sprinkle dough clumps with additional tablespoon of buttermilk (or milk for the yogurt dough). Be careful not to overmix. If using food processor, pulse until dough gathers into moist clumps. Remove from food processor bowl and form into rough ball.
4. With lightly floured hands, divide dough into 12 equal portions. Lightly bat a portion of dough back and forth a few times between floured hands until it begins to form a ball, then pat lightly with cupped hands to form a rough ball. Repeat with remaining dough, placing formed dough rounds 1 inch apart on ungreased cookie

sheet or pizza pan. Brush dough tops with melted butter or milk. (May be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 2 hours.) Bake until biscuit tops are light brown, 10 to 12 minutes. Serve immediately.

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