

How to Bake a Cake

Being the true and terrible story of what happened when Milo Pratt, age 9, followed the instructions exactly

I am not allowed in the kitchen any more.

I want to say right at the start that everything I did, I did because a piece of paper told me to. If you have a problem with what happened to the kitchen, the ceiling, the dog, or Mrs Petrakis next door, please take it up with the piece of paper.

Here is how it started.

It was Nan's eightieth birthday. Mum was at work until four. My big sister Priya was at netball, which is where she goes to avoid helping. So it was just me, our dog Kevin, and a plan.

The plan was this: bake Nan's famous lemon cake as a surprise.

Nan has made that cake for every birthday in our family since before Mum was born. Everyone says the words "Nan's famous lemon cake" in a special voice, like they are saying the name of a king. I found her recipe card in the tin on top of the fridge. It is yellow, it is covered in old butter smudges, and she wrote it in 1974.

Here it is. I have copied it out exactly.

NAN'S FAMOUS LEMON CAKE

You will need:

- butter
- 1 c sugar
- 1 t salt
- 2 eggs
- flour
- 1 t baking powder
- 1 lemon
- milk

What to do:

1. Preheat the oven.
2. Grease the tin.
3. Separate two eggs.
4. Beat the butter and the sugar until light and fluffy.
5. Add 1 t salt.
6. Fold in the flour.
7. Add the zest of one lemon.

8. Beat for two minutes.
9. Bake until done.

I read it twice. It looked easy. Nine steps. I have done harder things than nine steps. I once did a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle with my cousin, and eleven pieces were missing, and I did not cry until the end.

I did not know yet that Nan's recipe card is the worst set of instructions in Australia.

Step 1. Preheat the oven.

The dial on our oven goes up to 250. The recipe did not say a number, so I picked the biggest one, because more heat means faster cooking, and faster cooking means a faster cake.

I would like you to remember that I made this decision calmly and on purpose. That will be important later.

Step 2. Grease the tin.

I got the butter out of the fridge and put it on the bench while I looked for the tin.

When I came back, Kevin was under the table eating the butter. All of it. The whole block. He had also eaten most of the wrapper, and he did not look sorry, and he has never once looked sorry about anything in his life.

So I greased the tin with the olive oil spray instead. I sprayed it for about forty seconds, until the tin was extremely greased, and then a bit more so it would definitely not stick.

Step 3. Separate two eggs.

This step was easy and I did it perfectly.

I put one egg at one end of the bench, and I put the other egg all the way down the other end of the bench, near the toaster. They stayed separated the whole time. I checked twice. At no point did those eggs go anywhere near each other.

Nan says now that "separate the eggs" means something completely different. I would like to say, on the record, that if you mean "pull the yellow bit out of the white bit," you should write "pull the yellow bit out of the white bit."

Step 4. Beat the butter and the sugar until light and fluffy.

We had no butter left, because of Kevin.

Mum always says margarine and butter are basically the same thing, so I went looking for something spreadable, and the only thing in the fridge door was a tub of garlic butter from when we had spaghetti.

Butter is butter. It says so on the tub. I used the whole thing.

Then I beat it. I beat it with a wooden spoon. I beat it hard, and I said “come on, be fluffy” out loud several times, which did not help but did make me feel more in charge.

Step 5. Add 1 t salt.

Nan keeps her sugar and her salt in two identical white jars with no labels on them, so first I had to work out which one was which. I licked my finger and dipped it in. That is proper scientific testing and I am the only person in this story who did any.

The next problem was that I did not know what “t” meant. It could be teaspoon. It could be tablespoon. It could be tub. I decided it meant tub, because “1 t” looked very small on the page, and the cake was supposed to feed eight people, and eight people need a lot of ingredients.

So I put in one tub of what I very strongly believed was salt.

It was salt.

That is the worst part. Out of everything I did that day, that is the one thing I got right.

Step 6. Fold in the flour.

I tipped in the flour and then I folded it.

I want to be clear that I did exactly what it said. I got my hands in there and I folded the mixture over on itself, like a towel, and then in half again, like a smaller towel. It did not want to be folded. It stuck to my fingers, my watch and my elbow.

Nan told me afterwards that in cooking, “fold” means “stir gently.”

Nan, if you are reading this: that is a terrible name for stirring.

Step 7. Add the zest of one lemon.

I did not know what zest was. I still thought it might be a brand of soap.

But I know what zest means in normal life, because my teacher Mr Halloran uses it all the time. He says, “Milo, tackle that with some zest!” It means energy. It means enthusiasm. It means giving it everything you have got.

So I thought about it properly, and I decided that the zest of a lemon is all the energy inside the lemon, and the only way to get all of it is to put the whole lemon in.

I put the whole lemon in. I did not cut it. A lemon has a lot of zest and I did not want to lose any of it down the sink.

Step 8. Beat for two minutes.

Two minutes of the wooden spoon felt slow, and there was a whole lemon rolling around the bowl like a boat in a storm, so I got out Mum's electric mixer to be efficient.

Here is the thing about an electric mixer. You are supposed to put the beaters *into* the mixture, and *then* turn it on.

I turned it on first.

I found this out in about half a second, which is how long it took for the mixture to leave the bowl. Some of it went on the window. Some of it went on the fridge. A very large amount of it went straight up and stayed on the ceiling in a shape I can only describe as a hand-print, if the hand was enormous and made of cake.

Kevin, who had been sitting under the bowl this entire time waiting for exactly this, was now yellow.

Then the lemon juice met the baking powder, and the whole bowl started to hiss and rise like a science experiment, and a lemon-and-garlic-scented foam began climbing over the side and onto the bench, and the smoke alarm went off, because the oven had been at 250 degrees for twenty-five minutes with nothing in it.

And that is the exact moment the doorbell rang.

It was Nan.

She was two hours early.

PART TWO

I did what any calm and sensible person would do.

I put the bowl in the oven, mixture and lemon and all, slammed the door, threw a tea towel over the foam on the bench, pushed the yellow dog into the laundry, and answered the door with my hands behind my back.

"Hello, Milo," said Nan. "Why are your eyebrows white?"

"Flour," I said. "I mean. No."

She came in. She stood in the middle of the kitchen. She looked at the ceiling for a long, long time.

"Is something burning?" she said.

"No," I said.

The smoke alarm went off again, and honestly, it did not help my case.

Twenty minutes later I got the cake out of the oven.

It was not a cake. It was the shape of a cake, but it had gone flat and grey-gold and hard, and it had come out of the tin in one piece, which was the only good news, because I had greased that tin for forty seconds.

I put it on the bench and it made a noise like a brick.

I tapped it. It sounded like a door.

I dropped it, because it was heavier than I expected, and it hit the floor and bounced, and then it chipped the tile, and then it rolled slightly, and then it stopped.

We both looked at it.

I tried to cut it with the big knife. The knife bent. I tried to cut it with the bread knife, and I want you to know that the bread knife lost. Kevin came in and tried to bite it, and then carried it into the lounge room and lay down with it between his paws like it was the best bone he had ever been given in his life.

That was when I went and sat in the pantry and shut the door.

It is quite good in the pantry. It is dark, it smells like Weet-Bix, and nobody can see your face.

After a bit, the door opened. Nan sat down on the floor outside it, which is a big deal, because she is eighty and getting back up is a whole project.

"I wanted to make you your famous cake," I said. "And I wrecked it. And I wrecked the kitchen. And I wrecked the dog."

Nan did not say anything for a moment. Then she reached over, took a piece of the cake off the plate, and ate it.

I want to be clear that nobody asked her to do this.

She chewed. She chewed for quite a while. Her eyes went a bit wide.

"Milo," she said at last, "that is the worst thing I have eaten in eighty years."

And then she started laughing. She laughed so hard she had to hold onto the doorframe. She laughed until she had to wipe her eyes with her sleeve, and every time she looked at the cake she started again, and then Kevin came in glowing bright yellow and she completely lost it and had to lie down flat on the kitchen floor.

When she finally sat up, she told me the truth about the famous lemon cake.

For the first ten years, it was terrible. Every single time. Too dry, too flat, burnt on the bottom. And every single time, my grandpa ate two slices and said, "Betty, that is the best cake in Western Australia," and he said it with a completely straight face, and then he went out to the shed and had a biscuit.

She only got good at it because she kept making it.

"The cake was never the famous part," Nan said. "We were."

So then we made it again. Together. She stood next to me and told me what all the words meant, and I wrote them down properly this time, because I have decided that Nan's recipe card should not be allowed near children.

The second cake was excellent. We had it with candles in it at four o'clock, and Mum came home and stood in the doorway and said "WHAT HAPPENED TO MY CEILING," and Nan said, "Nothing, dear, sit down and have some cake."

THE SAME RECIPE, WRITTEN PROPERLY THIS TIME

by Milo Pratt, age 9, who has learned some things

Goal: To make one lemon cake that is a cake and not a brick.

You will need:

- 125 grams of butter, softened (NOT garlic butter)
- 1 cup of white sugar (from the jar with SUGAR written on it in pen, which I have now done)
- 1 teaspoon of salt. A teaspoon. The small spoon. Not a tub.
- 2 eggs
- 1 and a half cups of self-raising flour
- 1 teaspoon of baking powder
- the skin of 1 lemon, grated on the smallest holes of the grater. This is called zest. It is not the lemon's enthusiasm. It is just the yellow bit of the skin.
- half a cup of milk

Steps:

1. Turn the oven on to 180 degrees Celsius. One hundred and eighty. Do not choose your own number.
2. Rub butter around the inside of a cake tin, then shake a spoonful of flour around it so the cake will come out later.
3. Crack the eggs one at a time and tip the yellow part into one bowl and the clear part into another bowl. This is what "separate the eggs" means. Do not put the eggs in different parts of the room.
4. Put the butter and the sugar in a big bowl. Stir them hard with a wooden spoon for about three minutes, until the mixture turns pale and soft.
5. Add the salt and the egg yolks. Stir until mixed.
6. Add the flour a little at a time. Stir it in slowly and gently. In cooking, this is called folding, for no good reason.
7. Add the lemon zest and the milk. Stir until smooth.
8. Put the beaters into the mixture. THEN turn the mixer on. Beat for two minutes.
9. Pour the mixture into the tin and put it in the oven for 35 minutes.
10. Test it by poking a skewer into the middle. If it comes out clean, it is done. If it comes out sticky, cook it for five more minutes and test it again. This

is what “bake until done” means.

11. Let it cool for 20 minutes before you take it out of the tin.

Safety notes:

- Use oven mitts. The tray is hotter than you think it is, every single time.
- Ask an adult before you turn the oven on.
- Put the butter away before the dog does.

Warnings from experience:

- One lemon does not go in whole.
- If a knife bends, the cake is not ready. The cake is a building material.

I am allowed back in the kitchen next month.

Kevin is not.

THE END