

FEBRUARY

Baking School In-Depth: Texas Sheet Cake

For this month's lesson, we're bringing you all the same content with an exciting new name: Baking School In-Depth! And what better place to start than with a new take on a Southern classic, the Texas sheet cake. Although it's unclear whether the cake was named after the Lone Star State because of a recipe printed in a Dallas newspaper in the 1950s or because of its sheer size, one thing's for sure: you don't mess with the Texas sheet cake, typically made up of a single layer of sheet cake with a poured fudgy chocolate frosting. But we decided to take this cake to new heights as a luscious layer cake. Baked in a single sheet pan and then cut and stacked, the layers of this chocolate cake are as decadently delicious as they are easy to bake. With the help of this month's module, you'll learn how to hand-mix the ultimate chocolate cake batter, create a dreamy and smooth Chocolate Frosting using only your blender and a double boiler, and construct a supremely stacked layer cake.



INGREDIENT BREAKDOWN

Great recipes require great ingredients. Here's how each of our recipe's simple ingredients contributes to making the ultimate Texas sheet cake.

UNSALTED BUTTER: For this stir-together cake, we melt the butter so it incorporates smoothly. Allowing the butter to melt with the water and cocoa powder on the stovetop also helps to bloom the cocoa powder, ensuring a smooth batter with an even distribution of rich chocolate flavor. Although a lot of richer cakes often call for a neutral oil, we opt for unsalted butter to achieve a little extra buttery flavor and richness. Butter also helps the cake to set more solidly because it solidifies as it cools, which ultimately makes it easier to slice and stack your layers.

WATER: Water not only works to add moisture to the cake but also helps to bloom, or hydrate, the cocoa powder called for in the recipe. As the cocoa combines and heats with the butter and water on the stovetop, larger clumps dissolve, making a smooth mixture that's easier to incorporate into the batter. Blooming cocoa powder also helps release flavor particles, making for a richer, more intense flavor.

UNSWEETENED COCOA POWDER: Also referred to as natural cocoa powder, unsweetened cocoa powder is essentially untreated ground cocoa. Typically lighter and redder in color, unsweetened cocoa powder can also have a slightly harsher flavor. Unlike Dutch process cocoa powder, which is treated with an alkali to neutralize acidity, unsweetened cocoa powder is left untouched to maintain acidity. Many baked goods rely upon cocoa's acidity to activate the baking soda that makes them rise, and this cake is no exception.

ALL-PURPOSE FLOUR: For the fine crumb of this rich chocolate cake, a flour that balances between soft and hard is needed. All-purpose wheat flour serves as the perfect solution, with a protein content ranging from 10% to 12%. At this level, the cake is tender but structured enough to cut and stack. The resulting cake is fudgy, decadently dense, and the perfect complement to velvety-rich Chocolate Frosting.

DARK BROWN SUGAR: Dark brown sugar typically contains nearly twice as much molasses as light brown sugar (6.5% as compared to 3.5%), which gives it a richer caramel flavor and darker color. In this cake, it also provides a little extra acidity to react with the baking soda called for in the recipe.



INGREDIENT BREAKDOWN

ESPRESSO POWDER: In small amounts, espresso powder, like most other coffee products, enhances the flavor of chocolate. Adding espresso powder will not add coffee flavor. This ingredient can be left out, if desired.

BAKING SODA: Baking soda requires an acid be present in the batter (in this case, cocoa powder and buttermilk) to help tenderize baked goods. Baking soda releases most of its gas immediately once combined with an acid and moisture, so doughs and batters leavened only or primarily with baking soda should be baked soon after it's added. If too much is used, the final baked product may have a slightly soapy taste and a brownish-yellow cast. If too little is used, making the batter or dough too acidic, the final product may not brown adequately.

KOSHER SALT: We bake with kosher salt because, unlike most commercial salt, it doesn't contain iodine, making it taste purer and more palatable. Also, the salt crystals are larger. Table salt is much finer, so you would use half of what a recipe with kosher salt calls for.

WHOLE BUTTERMILK: This acidic dairy product adds a tart taste to baked goods. Make sure you use whole buttermilk, not fat-free or low-fat, because the tenderizing fat in the buttermilk helps to create a richer cake. If you have difficulty locating whole buttermilk, you can make a quick substitution. Simply add 1½ teaspoons (7.5 grams) distilled white vinegar or fresh lemon juice to ½ cup (120 grams) whole milk. Let stand for 5 minutes to allow mixture to thicken.

EGGS: Eggs bring richness through their yolks and moisture through their whites, but they also help leaven baked goods. In this recipe, we use two large eggs for leavening, flavor, richness, and structure.

VANILLA EXTRACT: A cake without vanilla—even a chocolate cake—lacks depth of flavor. So, a dash of high-quality vanilla extract both complements and enhances the decadent cocoa notes in this cake.

PECANS: It wouldn't be a true Texas sheet cake without the addition of some toasted chopped pecans distributed between the layers and sprinkled on top. They not only provide satisfying crunch but also add a toasted, nutty note to each bite that plays beautifully with the sweet depth of chocolate flavor in both the cake and frosting.





LAYERED TEXAS SHEET CAKE

Makes 1 (11x5½-inch) cake

A classic reimagined, this Texas sheet cake stacks up in more ways than one. Taking all the tried-and-true components of a traditional Texas sheet cake—the rich and tender chocolate cake, fudgy Chocolate Frosting, and crisp toasted pecans—this cake balances beautifully between simplicity and sophistication.

- 1 cup (227 grams) unsalted butter, cubed
- 1 cup (240 grams) water
- ⅓ cup (25 grams) unsweetened cocoa powder
- 2 cups (250 grams) all-purpose flour
- 1½ cups (330 grams) firmly packed dark brown sugar
- 2 teaspoon (4 grams) espresso powder
- 1 teaspoon (5 grams) baking soda
- ½ teaspoon (1.5 grams) kosher salt
- ½ cup (120 grams) whole buttermilk, room temperature
- 2 large eggs (100 grams), room temperature
- 1 teaspoon (4 grams) vanilla extract

Chocolate Frosting (recipe follows)

- ¾ cup (84 grams) toasted chopped pecans

1. Preheat oven to 350°F (180°C). Spray a 17 ¼ x 12 ¼ -inch rimmed baking sheet with baking spray with flour. Line bottom of pan with parchment paper.
2. In a medium saucepan, heat butter, 1 cup (240 grams) water, and cocoa over medium-low heat, whisking occasionally, until butter is melted and mixture is smooth. Pour into a bowl; let cool until slightly warm.
3. In a large bowl, whisk together flour, brown sugar, espresso powder, baking soda, and salt. Make a well in center.
4. In a small bowl, whisk together buttermilk, eggs, and vanilla. Add buttermilk mixture to chocolate mixture, and whisk until combined. Add chocolate mixture to flour mixture, whisking until smooth and stopping to scrape sides of bowl. Pour into prepared pan, and spread into

an even layer. Tap pan on a kitchen towel-lined counter to release any air bubbles.

5. Bake until cake pulls away from sides of pan and a wooden pick inserted in center comes out clean, 12 to 15 minutes. Let cool completely in pan on a wire rack.
6. Freeze cooled cake until firm, about 30 minutes.
7. Invert frozen cake onto a cutting board, and discard parchment. Trim edges to create a 16x11-inch cake. Cut into thirds crosswise to create 3 (11x5½-inch) rectangles. Place 1 rectangle, top side up, on a cake plate. Spread 1 cup (270 grams) Chocolate Frosting on top, and sprinkle with one-third of pecans. Top with second rectangle; spread 1 cup (270 grams) frosting on top, and sprinkle with one-third of pecans. Top with remaining rectangle; spread remaining Chocolate Frosting on top, and sprinkle with remaining pecans. Serve immediately, or cover and refrigerate until ready to serve. Serve at room temperature.

CHOCOLATE FROSTING

Makes about 3¾ cups

- 2 (5-ounce) cans (294 grams) evaporated milk*
- 2 cups (400 grams) granulated sugar
- ½ teaspoon (1.5 grams) kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon (2 grams) vanilla extract

- 8 ounces (226 grams) 100% cacao unsweetened chocolate, chopped
- ½ cup (113 grams) unsalted butter, cubed
- 1 teaspoon (2 grams) espresso powder

1. In a medium bowl, whisk together evaporated milk, sugar, salt, and vanilla until combined. Transfer to the container of a blender, and process on medium speed until smooth and sugar is melted, about 30 seconds.
2. In the top of a double boiler, place chocolate, butter, and espresso powder. Cook over simmering water, until melted and smooth, stirring only when chocolate mixture is almost melted. Add to milk mixture; process on medium speed until thickened, shiny, and smooth, stopping to scrape sides of container, 30 to 45 seconds. Transfer to a medium bowl. Cover and refrigerate until cooled, about 15 minutes.

**If you cannot find the smaller cans and need to measure from a 12-ounce can, 294 grams is right under 1¼ cups.*



BRINGING TOGETHER THE BATTER

Moist and tender chocolate cake starts with a perfectly prepared batter



- 1. Preheat oven to 350°F (180°C). Spray a 17 ¼ x 12 ¼ -inch rimmed baking sheet with baking spray with flour. Line bottom of pan with parchment paper.**
- 2. In a medium saucepan, heat butter, 1 cup (240 grams) water, and cocoa over medium-low heat, whisking occasionally, until butter is melted and mixture is smooth. Pour into a bowl; let cool until slightly warm.** Unlike most cakes, which use softened butter and cream it with the sugar to create air pockets, the melted butter in this cake helps to create a tighter, more structured crumb, meaning the cake itself will be denser and richer. Combining the butter with the water and cocoa powder in this step also helps to break up any clumps of cocoa powder and develop a deeper chocolate flavor as the mixture heats. The resulting homogeneous mixture is also easier to incorporate into this simple stir-together batter.

BRINGING TOGETHER THE BATTER



- 3.** In a large bowl, whisk together flour, brown sugar, espresso powder, baking soda, and salt. Make a well in center.
- 4.** In a small bowl, whisk together buttermilk, eggs, and vanilla. Add buttermilk mixture to chocolate mixture, and whisk until combined. Add chocolate mixture to flour mixture, whisking until smooth and stopping to scrape sides of bowl. Mixing the eggs, buttermilk, and vanilla together before adding them to the warm chocolate mixture helps to lessen the chance of the eggs curdling after being added. It'll also ensure that the eggs are broken up and more thoroughly incorporated throughout your batter.

BRINGING TOGETHER THE BATTER



5. Pour into prepared pan, and spread into an even layer. Tap pan on a kitchen towel-lined counter to release any air bubbles.
6. Bake until cake pulls away from sides of pan and a wooden pick inserted in center comes out clean, 12 to 15 minutes. Let cool completely in pan on a wire rack.

FIXING UP THE ULTIMATE FROSTING

Creamy and smooth, this frosting comes together in a cinch thanks to a quick blitz in the blender.



1. In a medium bowl, whisk together evaporated milk, sugar, salt, and vanilla until combined. Transfer to the container of a blender, and process on medium speed until smooth and sugar is melted, 30 seconds.

FIXING UP THE ULTIMATE FROSTING



- 2.** In the top of a double boiler, place chocolate and butter. Cook over simmering water, until melted and smooth, stirring only when chocolate mixture is almost melted. A double boiler gives you the best control over the heat while you melt your butter and chocolate. Despite being called a double boiler, it's important that the water stays at a simmer. Boiling water could produce excess steam, increasing the risk of moisture getting into your chocolate mixture. The steam of the simmering water, however, will gently melt the chocolate and butter, making it far less likely to burn.
- 3.** Add to milk mixture; process on medium speed until thickened, shiny, and smooth, stopping to scrape sides of container, 30 to 45 seconds. Transfer to a medium bowl. Cover and refrigerate until cooled, about 15 minutes.

CONSTRUCTING YOUR CAKE

This is the step that'll set your sheet cake apart. Stacked and layered with velvety Chocolate Frosting and crunchy toasted pecans, this cake is sure to be a showstopper!



- 1. Freeze cooled cake until firm, about 30 minutes.** Freezing your cake before cutting will help to ensure cleaner cuts as well as fewer crumbs. Ultimately, constructing a layer cake will always be easier with frozen layers.
- 2. Invert frozen cake onto a cutting board, and discard parchment.** Trim edges to create a 16x11-inch cake. Cut into thirds crosswise to create 3 (11x5½-inch) rectangles. Place 1 rectangle, top side up, on a cake plate. Spread 1 cup (270 grams) Chocolate Frosting on top, and sprinkle with one-third of pecans. Top with second rectangle; spread 1 cup (270 grams) frosting on top, and sprinkle with one-third of pecans. Top with remaining rectangle; spread remaining Chocolate Frosting on top, and sprinkle with remaining pecans. Serve immediately, or cover and refrigerate until ready to serve. Serve at room temperature.