

ASK THE EXPERTS

Q: Does it matter what size cake tins I use?

A: Cake baking requires precision and this includes the size of the tins. Too big and your cake will be thin and cook too quickly, too small and your mixture will overflow as it rises. So always use the size of tin specified in the recipe. You can get away with a difference of about 1cm, but any more than that and you'll need to adjust the baking time.

A square tin will have a greater capacity than a round tin, so if you want to use a square tin, go down a size, e.g. an 18cm/7in square tin would be comparable to a 20cm/8in round tin.

Q: Why is my cake heavy?

A: Under-beating or over-beating the mixture can make a heavy cake. If your mixture is under-mixed there will be streaks of fat, an uneven colour and possibly some lumps. You need to beat a little more until it's smooth. It's hard to tell when a mixture is over-beaten, so stop as soon as it looks smooth, otherwise you can overwork the gluten in the flour, which will result in a tough, rubbery cake. Not enough raising agent can also make a cake heavy, but don't be tempted to add more than the recipe says.

Q: Why has my cake sunk in the middle?

A: Did you open the oven door before the cake was cooked? Never open the door until at least two thirds of the cooking time has passed and the mixture has set. Too much raising agent can also cause a cake to 'over-rise' then collapse on itself, so follow the recipe closely.

Q: Why are my scones hard and dry?

A: The most common reason is overworking the dough. You should chaff or fold rather than knead, to avoid stretching the gluten in the flour. Other reasons could be not adding enough liquid, using a raising agent that is too old and ineffective, or overcooking your scones.

Q: Why hasn't my soufflé risen?

A: The whisked egg whites need to be beaten until stiff and folded in very gently otherwise the air gets knocked out and the soufflé won't rise. Always put them into the pre-heated oven as quickly as possible and don't open the oven door during cooking or they'll collapse. If they're not cooked properly when you take them out, they may sink.

Paul Hollywood and Mary Berry



Q: Why is my dough too sticky?

A: You've probably added too much liquid. Gradually add just enough flour to make your dough manageable, but not too much or it will become dry. Dough can be stickier on hot days, so lightly coat your hands with flour or oil during kneading. Also check that you haven't forgotten to add the salt, as this can affect the consistency of your dough.

Q: How long should I leave my bread to prove?

A: The best way to tell if the dough has fully proved is to judge when it has almost doubled in size. When it has proved, it should be light to the touch and bounce back when you gently push it with your finger.

Let your dough double in size, but don't let it expand any further. If you let your bread rise too far, the structure can become weak and may collapse during baking. If you can't bake it straight away, transfer it to the fridge where it can be left overnight.

On the second proving, if the dough starts creasing on the sides it's a sign the dough has over-proved. If this happens you can knock back the dough and re-shape it (knocking back a second time actually improves the flavour).

Recipe times are just a guideline as dough will prove at different speeds depending on the warmth of the room and the consistency of the dough.

Q: Why is my bread heavy and stodgy?

A: The answer is in your kneading. Kneading combines the ingredients, activates the yeast and develops the gluten which holds the loaf together. If you don't knead enough the dough won't hold pockets of air and will collapse, making bread heavy and dense.

Another possibility is that it didn't rise for long enough. Under-proved dough splits and has an uneven texture. If it's tight, stodgy or doughy at the bottom it's a sign that your dough hasn't proved for long enough. When you're proving, the dough should double in size then be knocked back (using your hands to punch out the air) and then allowed to double in size again before baking.

Another reason could be that it needed longer in the oven. When cooked, bread sounds hollow if tapped underneath.

Q: Why hasn't my bread got a crusty top?

A: Normally this is because the oven isn't hot enough. Make sure you pre-heat your oven according to the recipe. Put a shallow tin of water in the bottom of the oven to create steam and help form a crisp crust.