



Kitchen Confidential

Take one food writer, plop him into a kitchen and at a computer for more than two decades and what do you get? A whole lot of experience and good suggestions.

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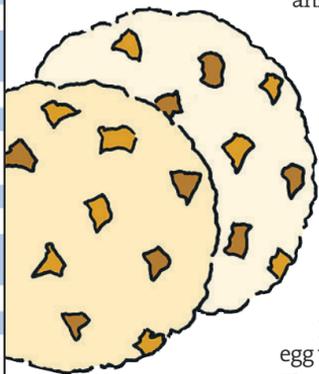
After almost 39 years at the Star Tribune, 26 of them writing about food and testing recipes for the Taste section, I'm hanging up my whisk. During those 26 years I learned a heck of a lot about cooking and baking, some of it at readers' expense. (In the recipe for Strawberries on the Bottom Cake, published Jan. 1, 2004, for example, the gelatin-strawberry mixture should be spread over the cake batter before baking. Sorry



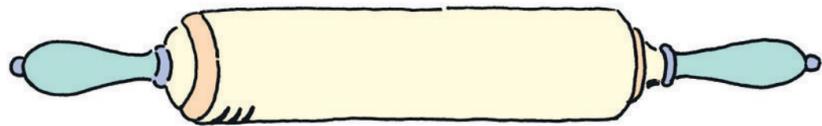
about that.) Anyway, it seemed only fair to pass along some of the things that I learned while rattling pots and pans for the Star Tribune. Not many are arcane secrets; you might well know all of them. And I expect to continue to visit the supermarket (because I expect to continue to eat), so I'll be dropping in here once a week to report on the peculiar new food products that I stumble across. I'll see you in the Tidbits column.

Seven baking tips

1 Making a yeast dough? Take 5 minutes to proof the yeast, even if that step isn't in the recipe. Here's how: Put the yeast in a cup and add ¼ cup of warm water (and use ¼ cup less liquid elsewhere in the recipe). Stir to dissolve, then wait 5 minutes or so. If the yeast isn't foaming, discard it and buy new yeast. That's annoying, but not nearly as annoying as finding out much later that the dough didn't rise.



2 When folding two parts of a batter together, don't try to make it uniform — especially if one is beaten egg whites or whipped cream. The more you fold, the more you let out the air you just whipped in. (Stirring is even worse; that's why we fold.) Stop when there are just streaks of one part showing in the other.



Illustrations by BRUCE BJERVA • bbjerva@startribune.com
Photo by STEVE RICE • srice@startribune.com

3 When you've poured half of the batter into the baking pan(s), do another quick fold to make sure you didn't miss anything that might have settled to the bottom.

4 When making cake or cookies with a recipe that calls for creaming butter and sugar, soften the butter first — on the countertop 30 minutes to an hour, or in the microwave on lowest power 1 minute or so.

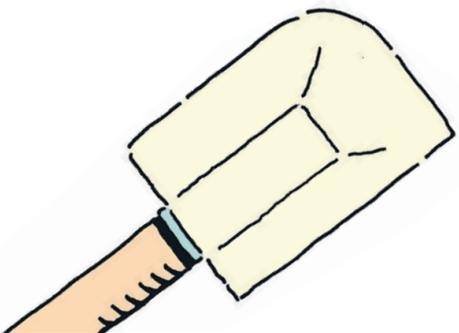
5 Even if the recipe says to, don't cool pie filling before putting it in the pie shell: That can make the filling runny. Add the filling while hot, so that once it sets, it stays set. (Letting it cool first might be an idea

planted by agents of giant ready-made-pie consortiums.)

6 When baking cookies — unless you like them cakey — don't use "spreads" (margarines containing added water to lower the fat content). For crisp cookies, it's best to stick to full-fat margarine or butter — or, if you must, use spread products with 65 percent oil or more.

7 Sift together the flour and any baking powder and/or baking soda before adding the flour to the batter. Simply stirring leavenings into batter doesn't disperse them well.

There are plenty more kitchen tips and some of Al Sicherman's favorite recipes. T6-T8



Oven

Unless a baked-goods recipe calls for an extended wait before baking, always preheat the oven as your first step, so it's hot when the pan is ready to go into the oven. (If batter rests at room temperature while the oven warms up, leavenings can dissipate.)

All the presidents' menus from two White House chefs

• Two chefs, in new books, offer their perspective on the White House kitchen.

From NEWS SERVICES

You won't read "White House Chef: Eleven Years, Two Presidents, One Kitchen" for the recipes, though it's kind of glamorous to think that the Lemongrass and Red Curry

Dressing you served over your vegetables last night was created for Nelson Mandela.

But you'll devour the details about White House chef Walter Scheib and his meals for the two families that inhabited that house during his tenure.

We, who all have our own go-to comfort foods, learn that a plate of sizzling steak fajitas can lift Hillary Rodham Clinton out of a funk, and

that daughter Chelsea needed (and got) cooking lessons before heading off to Stanford.

Some things might not surprise, like learning that President Bush often jogged up to the White House kitchen and said, "Hi, Cookie, what's for lunch today?" before ordering one of his standard meals: a BLT, a grilled cheese made with Kraft singles and white bread, or a medium to medium-rare burger, all served with

Lay's potato chips on the side.

Scheib, a Culinary Institute of America graduate, was an executive chef for major hotels before Hillary Clinton hired him in 1994, hoping to take the food served at White House functions away from traditional French cuisine to dishes that showcased the finest in American ingredients and culinary innovation.

White House continues T3 ►

RESTAURANTS
Something's familiar about Crave T2

Parsley stands tall in this carrot slaw T4