

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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You've surely seen some of the recipes that start with a cake mix but end up with something that looks and tastes entirely different. Cookbooks offer cookies, pies, brownies, cobblers, shortcakes and even pancakes starting with a cake mix. How a cake mix can take all these changes without breaking down is amazing. Mixes depend on ingredients that were newly developed in the early 1900's. We've been using mixes for about 70 years now! Some people think all cakes should taste and feel like a cake-mix cake because they've never had one 'made from scratch.'" Yet we home cooks keep changing them too, adding ingredients and cooking them differently.

One of the ingredients that was new a century ago is cake flour. Cake flour is made from soft wheat with less protein. Little protein means the cake won't be tough like bread. It has been milled into super fine particles and bleached with chlorine. The very small particles of starch absorb liquids quickly. Treating the starch with chlorine makes it whiter. It also opens up the starch so that it swells quickly, trapping the air bubbles that make the cake rise. The treatment also makes fat in the batter stick to the starch so that it's evenly spread through the batter.

If you want a really tender, light and moist cake, you need to use cake flour. You can add corn starch to all purpose flour to reduce the amount of protein. But all purpose flour will not absorb moisture as quickly. It won't spread the fat throughout the batter as evenly. And it doesn't trap the air bubbles as well. The cake will taste great. But it won't be as light and fine-textured as a cake made with cake flour will be.

Vegetable shortening is another ingredient that cake mixes need to work well. Shortening holds those tiny air bubbles better than either butter or oil. It also has tiny bubbles beaten into it during manufacturing. More air bubbles means a cake rises quickly and evenly. Some cooks prefer butter for flavor, but shortening makes a lighter, taller cake. Oil cakes tend to be heavy and moist, completely different.

A third ingredient that cake mixes depend on is double-acting baking powders. These start to raise the batter when they get wet, that's the first act. The second act is more bubbles they make when they get hot, so the batter rises even more.

Putting all three ingredients together lets us use more sugar, making sweeter cake, and means we don't have to beat the batter until our arms fall off. One early cookbook author suggested that only the manservant of the house could beat the butter and sugar enough to make a cake rise well! Cake mix in a box solved that problem.

All of these ingredients are available for us at home. But cake mixes also contain a variety of other ingredients. Emulsifiers and stabilizers help mix the shortening in the mix with the liquid that we add, then keep them mixed. Commercial baking powders are more stable and can be made to create more rising than our usual home brands do.

Mixes have been developed to work every time. They can take a lot of abuse and still rise, brown and taste good. Manufacturers want us to be happy with their brands, no matter what we do to them. Use water, skip the egg and they'll still be delicious at least as cupcakes. Add extra moisture and fry them, they're tasty pancakes. Use less moisture and drop it by spoonfuls on fruit filling to bake, you'll have an unusual cobbler. Use your imagination to invent your own designs.

As long as cake mixes are there to give us the quick and easy foundation,

inventive cooks will be happy to find ways to make them homemade-special. This is a pretty simple adaptation, but with local strawberries so ripe and delicious, why not make something special for dessert tonight? (You'll need 4 or 5 lemons for the recipe.)

Berry-Full Lemon Cupcakes

1 box super moist French vanilla or vanilla cake mix 2 Tbsp grated lemon peel

Water, oil and eggs as called for on the box

2 cups washed, hulled strawberries 2 Tbsp grated lemon peel

2 12-oz containers whipped white frosting 1 Tbsp fresh lemon juice

Fine strips of lemon peel for garnish

Preheat oven to 350°F. Put cupcake papers into each of 24 regular muffin cups.

Prepare cake as directed on box, adding 2 Tbsp grated lemon peel in addition to the water, oil and eggs. Bake as directed for cupcakes. Cool 10 minutes in pans, then remove to rack to cool completely. Set aside 12 strawberries for garnish. Chop enough remaining berries to make 1 cup. Beat chopped berries, 1 cup of frosting and 2 Tbsp lemon peel until well blended. Put a ¼ inch round tip on decorating bag, spoon frosting into bag. Insert tip into center of cupcake about 2/3 of way down, and squeeze bag gently until cupcake swells a little bit and filling comes to top of cupcake. Don't let it ooze out of cupcake. Repeat for all cupcakes. Thin remaining frosting with lemon juice and frost cupcakes. Cut remaining whole berries in half. Frost cupcakes, and garnish with half a berry and a strip of lemon peel. Serves 12 - 24.