

Diane's Blog 4.1.2009

Measuring Up

Here's the scene: An inexperienced cooking enthusiast walks into the kitchen hungry to make a new recipe for a delicious-sounding cake. How hard can it be? The recipe calls for butter, sugar, eggs, flour, baking powder, vanilla, and other sweet spices. Perfect—no trip to the grocery store is needed, everything is on hand. The butter is left out to soften, the eggs are brought to room temperature, and the mixer is set on the counter. The cook thinks, ah, there is nothing more pleasurable than spur-of-the moment baking on a rainy spring afternoon.

As the recipe indicates, the butter and sugar are beaten until light and fluffy. The eggs are added, one at a time, taking about 2 minutes total to add them all. While the mixing is going on, the cook measures the flour. The sack of flour is taken from the pantry shelf, set on the counter and opened. The recipe calls for 2 cups of flour. Easy enough—a 1-cup metal measuring cup is pulled from the drawer, a small mixing bowl is at hand, and the cook scoops out a cup of flour, swipes a finger across the top of the cup and dumps it into the mixing bowl. That step is repeated for the second cup.

So? Is there a problem? After all, the cook has the all-purpose flour the recipe calls for, even has the right measuring cup—a dry measuring cup with a handle and level top. Yet, indeed, there is a problem.

Scooping a measuring cup into a bag of flour that has been compressed through packing and storing is going to produce a "heavy" cup of flour. What is amazing, when you experiment as I have, is the quantity difference between a cup of "scooped flour" and a cup of "spooned flour." It can be as much as a quarter cup. That 25% variance can be the difference between a light, airy cake versus a heavy, dry cake, or a delicate, flaky pie dough versus one that has the texture of cardboard.

What does it mean to "spoon" flour for measuring? Way back when I was in high school, a class in home economics was required (for the girls) for graduation. The fussy teacher with her starched apron and neatly pulled-back hair, started the first lesson with kitchen sanitation and the second lesson with learning to measure. We were instructed that glass measuring cups with spouts were for measuring liquids and the set of nesting metal cups with handles were for measuring dry ingredients. We were taught how to use a sifter because some recipes called for sifting ingredients. We were handed a spoon and shown how to stir flour in a flour sack or canister to first lighten it and then to spoon it into a measuring cup. With an ordinary table knife in hand, we were instructed to use the flat side of the blade to sweep across the top of the cup to level it. "That," our teacher said emphatically, "is how you properly measure flour."

I'm not advocating for the return of Home Ec classes, but I am eager for new cooks to learn the fundamentals, so that cooking is not only fun but successful. As authors, we are limited at times by how much information we can put in a book because of space

considerations. Editors will say, “If a recipe looks too long, or has too many steps, the reader won’t want to make it.” And book designers (and readers) love when a recipe fits on a single page! To further complicate a cook’s success, American cookbooks tend not to include weights. How great would it be if we all weighed ingredients? A cup of all-purpose flour wouldn’t be an approximation; it would be a consistent quantity because the weight of the flour is what really matters in the recipe.

I can wish for a move to the metric system, or for every cook to own a kitchen scale, but for now, I’d be happy to settle for a spoon, table knife, and proper set of measuring tools in a new cook’s kitchen—along with this simple measuring technique to ensure baking success.