

More than Strawberry Shortcakes

How to make a great shortcake and adapt it to your taste

BY SHANNON MCKINNEY

My partner and I own and operate a country restaurant and bakery, and we've noticed that more and more of our customers are looking for fresh, homey desserts like shortcakes. I love to create new desserts, so when I saw how popular our mixed-berry shortcake was, I decided to experiment with different fruit and filling combinations. Although strawberry is the classic partner for shortcakes, many fruits can be paired with the basic biscuit. No matter what fruit you use, the textures and tastes derived from the combination of fleshy fruit, crisp shortcake, and velvety whipped cream is nothing short of gastronomic bliss.

One thing I learned in my training as a pastry chef is that it's important to learn the basics first. So I'll begin with the basics, by telling you exactly how to make a perfect berry shortcake. From there, you'll be able to make my variations, and you can go on to create your own new shortcake desserts.

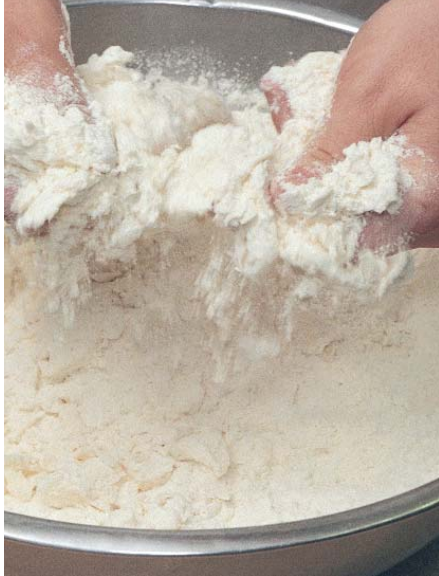
WHAT ARE SHORTCAKES?

Shortcakes are small, tender, sweetened biscuits. They are usually flat and round, ranging in diameter from 1 to 4 inches for individual servings. Some shortcakes are larger and cut into pieces like a pie. While most shortcakes are round, there's no reason not to cut yours into stars, moons, triangles, dogs, cats, or whatever you like. The term "short" refers to the crumbly, melt-in-your-mouth texture that is the hallmark of this dessert. Shortness is achieved by working the fat into the flour until the fat is in small granules, which makes a tender, coarse-grained crumb. Shortcakes should be light, airy, just barely brown, and delicious enough to eat on their own.

Basic shortcake biscuits consist of flour, fat, leavening agent, liquid, and flavoring. All-purpose flour works fine, but a low-gluten cake or pastry flour will work better, yielding a more tender short-

Crisp, tender biscuit, juicy berries, and rich whipped cream make the quintessential shortcake. The biscuit gets its characteristic "short" texture from the bits of fat mixed with the dry ingredients. This is different from a "flaky" texture, which comes from larger pieces of fat that, when rolled out, form leaves or flakes of pastry.





MAKING SHORTCAKE DOUGH

Rub the shortening and flour between your fingertips to blend them to the right consistency. Keep working until the mixture looks like very coarse meal.

Your hand is the best utensil for mixing the dough just right. Stop as soon as the flour is moistened and the ingredients form a loose dough.

Your dough will be rough, but that's how it should be. Don't be tempted to work it until smooth; gentle handling produces a tender biscuit.

cake. Fat types are also interchangeable; you can choose butter, margarine, vegetable shortening, even lard. Fats with higher melting points, such as vegetable shortening, will give shortcakes a lighter consistency. If you want a buttery flavor, you can always spread on some butter after baking. No matter which fat you choose, chill it until it's firm before using, so that your finished dough will be cool, firm, and easier to roll out.

The biscuits are leavened by baking powder, which, in the presence of moisture and heat, gives off carbon dioxide gas. There's really no other leavening agent appropriate for shortcakes.

The right liquid is more a matter of personal preference than of chemistry, and you can choose between milk or water. Whole milk, two-percent milk, or buttermilk will give the shortcakes a finer texture, better food value, and a richer flavor. Water, however, will also give satisfactory results. Chill the liquid before making your dough.

Salt and sugar are always added to shortcake dough, but there are many wonderful optional additions, such as vanilla extract, grated citrus zest, cinnamon, chocolate chips, candied ginger, pecans, almonds, cocoa, coconut, poppy seeds, or raisins.

MAKING AND BAKING THE BISCUIT DOUGH

Here's the basic procedure for making any shortcake dough. Combine the flour, sugar, salt, and baking powder in a bowl, stir a little to mix these ingredients, and then add the fat. Incorporate the fat into the flour mixture by taking a big pinch of the ingredients and rubbing your fingertips together lightly. Work like this until only very small lumps of fat remain, nothing larger than a small pea. Stir in any dry flavorings such as citrus zest or nuts at this point. Add the chilled liquid and mix with your hand just until the flour is completely moistened and the in-

gredients form a loose dough. Don't overmix, or you'll get a tough shortcake.

Pat out the dough onto a floured surface and roll it out until it's about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick. Cut the dough into the desired shapes, using a biscuit cutter or a sharp knife; dip the cutter or knife into some flour between each cut to prevent the dough from sticking. Reroll any scraps and cut again. Only do this once, though, because the dough gets tough if you handle it a lot.

Arrange the shortcakes about an inch apart on a parchment-lined sheet pan and bake them in a preheated oven. As for baking temperatures and times, no two ovens bake exactly the same, so these factors will vary. Aim for very lightly colored biscuits that have just about doubled in height. A little experimentation might be necessary to get the perfect conditions, but 400°F for 15 to 20 minutes is a good place to start. If you use a convection oven (which is what we use at the bakery), the temperature will be slightly lower and the time slightly less.

Some shortcake recipes call for brushing the raw dough with an egg wash or milk, dusting it with granulated sugar before baking, or a combination of these. This is to promote caramelization, which gives the shortcakes a deeper color and a crispier surface. In our recipes, the tops of the biscuits really don't show, so this step isn't necessary. When the shortcakes are baked, remove them from the oven, peel them off the parchment, and let them cool on a rack.

Ideally, you should use the fresh shortcakes the day they're baked. However, you may wrap them tightly in plastic film and store them in the refrigerator for up to a week. Just reheat the biscuits lightly in the oven before serving. You can also cover and freeze the cut, unbaked biscuits, and bake them as needed. Don't defrost them; just take them directly



Stamp out your biscuits economically, so you get a minimum of scraps. You can reroll scraps once, but after that the dough will get too tough.

BASIC SHORTCAKE BISCUITS

Makes 8 biscuits cut with a 3-inch round cutter.

12 ounces (2 $\frac{2}{3}$ cups) all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons sugar
1 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon plus 2 teaspoons baking powder
4 ounces ($\frac{2}{3}$ cup) vegetable shortening, chilled
1 cup buttermilk, chilled
2 teaspoons vanilla extract



Shortcake goes Hawaiian with fresh pineapple and roasted macadamia nuts, all bathed in sweet, amber caramel.



Spike fresh oranges with a splash of Grand Marnier for a sophisticated shortcake. A few shavings of bitter chocolate add contrasting color and flavor.

from the freezer to the oven, but reduce the heat slightly and let them cook a few minutes longer.

NOT JUST STRAWBERRIES

Before you decide what filling to make, find out what fruit is ripe and in season. Whether you buy wholesale or shop at the local market, use your senses to judge the freshest ingredients. Fresh, ripe fruit will not only look good, it will smell delicious, too.

The fruit for shortcakes, no matter what type, needs only simple preparation. Peel the fruit, if necessary, and slice it into small pieces (pick out any seeds). Put it in a bowl and sprinkle with a few spoonfuls of sugar. (Don't use an aluminum bowl because the metal could react with the acid in the fruit.) Toss it lightly just to mix, then cover the bowl and let it sit for about an hour at room temperature. The sugar will draw the natural juices out of the fruit, making a tasty liquid for moistening the shortcake biscuits. Taste your fruit mixture; if it's a little flat, add a tablespoon or two of fresh lemon juice for a flavor pick-me-up. When using delicate fruit such as raspberries or blackberries, reserve some of the whole berries before mixing with sugar for garnishing the final presentation.

A simple mix of fruit and sugar is the classic filling for shortcakes, but you can have fun and be creative by adding a splash of liqueur such as Triple Sec, Grand Marnier, Framboise, Kirschwasser, or any good cognac.

MAKING PERFECT WHIPPED CREAM

Whipping heavy cream is a simple process, but following these tips will give you better whipped cream every time. When shopping for cream, try to find one that is pasteurized, but not ultrapasteurized. Ultrapasteurization (a process that kills bacteria and

extends shelf life) brings cream to a high heat level that actually breaks down the molecules of fat in the product. These fat molecules are necessary for good whipped cream because they trap air and liquid during the whipping process, giving the cream the fluffy volume it needs. A pasteurized-only cream will whip faster and keep its shape and volume longer.

Always chill your utensils before whipping cream. Start with a clean, cold, stainless-steel, glass, or ceramic bowl (not aluminum, which can react with the whisk and give a gray tinge to the cream, nor plastic, which won't really hold the cold). Add the cream, and whip quickly with a wire whisk until the cream is slightly thickened. Now add the sugar and any flavorings. Continue to whip until the cream forms soft peaks. Don't whip beyond the soft-peak stage, because the cream will get stiff and curdled. Cover the bowl and refrigerate the cream until you're ready to assemble the shortcakes. Whipped cream made with good-quality cream should last for 24 hours.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

The finished shortcakes should be made to order as you need them. Assembling the desserts ahead of time and refrigerating will make the biscuits too firm. Also, room temperature fruit is much more flavorful than cold fruit.

Split the biscuits by pulling them apart, and place the bottom of the biscuit on the serving plate. Gently spoon the fruit and juice mixture onto the biscuit and top with a small amount of whipped cream. Put the remaining biscuit half on top of the fruit and spoon more fruit and juice on top. Add another dollop of whipped cream and garnish with some whole berries or chunks of fruit. Serve immediately, and, above all, enjoy.

BASIC BERRY FILLING

Enough for 8 biscuits.

- 1 cup strawberries
- 1 cup blackberries
- 1 cup raspberries
- ¼ cup sugar, or to taste

BASIC WHIPPED CREAM

Enough for 8 biscuits.

- 2 cups heavy cream
- ¼ cup sugar, or to taste
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract



Mellow white chocolate and tart, juicy cherries contrast deliciously. Because the mousse is rich and creamy, there's no need to serve them shortcake with whipped cream.

ORANGE AND GRAND MARNIER SHORTCAKES

Enough for 8 biscuits.

*2 tsp. grated orange zest
5 oranges, peeled and sectioned (see Basics), with their juice,
soaked in 1/3 cup Grand Marnier liqueur, and sprinkled
with 1/4 cup light brown sugar
Grated bitter chocolate*

Add the orange zest to the basic biscuit dough. Assemble the shortcakes as directed and sprinkle with the bitter chocolate.

PINEAPPLE, CARAMEL, AND ROASTED MACADAMIA NUT SHORTCAKES

Enough for 8 biscuits.

*2 1/4 cups sugar
1 cup heavy cream
2/3 cup macadamia nuts, salted or unsalted
1/2 beaten egg white
1 tsp. sugar
1 large fresh pineapple, peeled, cored, cut in 1/2-in. pieces,
and sprinkled with 1/4 cup sugar*

Make a caramel sauce—Put 2 1/4 cups sugar in a large, heavy pan and heat, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, until the sugar is melted (there will be lumps). Keep stirring until all the lumps disappear and the sugar is a medium-dark amber. Remove from the heat and carefully stir in 1/4 cup heavy cream. (The caramel will spatter, so stand back.) Add the rest of the cream and stir until completely smooth. Keep warm until ready to serve; store extra caramel sauce in the refrigerator for up to a month.

Glaze and roast the macadamia nuts—Stir the nuts, egg white, and 1 tsp. sugar until combined. Spread the

nuts on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper or foil and bake 13 to 15 min. in a 325°F oven. Cool completely. Assemble the shortcakes as directed, topping with the caramel sauce and macadamia nuts.

CHERRY AND WHITE-CHOCOLATE MOUSSE SHORTCAKES

Enough for 8 biscuits.

*2 cups heavy cream
8 oz. white chocolate, finely chopped
12 oz. (2 cups) pitted fresh cherries, soaked in 1/4 cup dark rum, and sprinkled with 1/4 cup sugar*

Make a white chocolate mousse—Start the mousse 8 to 24 hours before serving. Bring 2/3 cup heavy cream to a boil. Remove from the heat and add the white chocolate. Stir until completely melted. Transfer to a medium bowl and let cool until tepid. Put the rest of the cream in a chilled bowl and whip until soft peaks form. With a rubber spatula, gently but quickly fold the whipped cream into the white chocolate mixture until just combined. Cover and refrigerate at least 8 hours. Assemble the shortcakes as directed, piping the mousse around the top and bottom cakes.

Shannon McKinney graduated from the Culinary Institute of America in 1984, and then apprenticed for two years with world-renowned pastry chef Albert Kumin. In 1986, he and partner Brian Doyle opened their bakery, McKinney & Doyle Fine Foods, in Pawling, New York, where he applies his classical pastry training to a full range of all-American desserts. ♦