

KITCHEN NOTES

BY ERIKA BRUCE

Storing Pound Cake

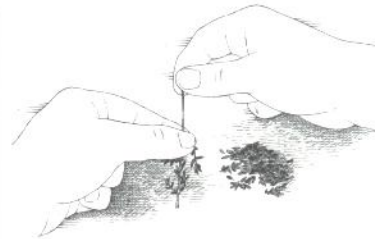
We had much better luck storing both whole and leftover Pound Cake (page 25) in the freezer, wrapped in a double layer of plastic wrap and foil, than in the refrigerator, where it would quickly stale. The cake usually defrosted nicely on the counter, but sometimes the top became soft and sticky. After some head scratching, we realized the problem only happened when we unwrapped the frozen cake before defrosting it. Keeping the cake wrapped as it thawed (which takes about four hours) ensured a nice, firm crust.

It took us a while to find this solution, because it contradicts the test kitchen's method for defrosting most baked goods. For instance, we've had better luck when we unwrapped cupcakes before defrosting. Why the discrepancy? Pound cakes have much less internal moisture than cupcakes or other baked goods that contain a liquid ingredient such as milk, cream, or yogurt. When unwrapped, liquid-

free pound cake has a propensity to draw moisture from the air, causing the crust to become wet; cupcakes, on the other hand, let off moisture, which gets trapped when the wrapping is left on but evaporates when the wrapping is removed.

Who Has the Thyme?

Picking minuscule leaves of fresh thyme can really pluck at your nerves, especially if a recipe calls for a good deal of it. In the test kitchen, we rely on some tricks to make this job go faster. If the thyme has very thin, pliable stems, just chop the stems and leaves together, discarding the tough bottom portions as you go. If the stems are thicker and woodier, hold the sprig of thyme upright, by the top of the stem; then run your thumb and forefinger down the stem to release the leaves and smaller offshoots. The tender tips can be left intact and chopped along with the leaves once the woodier stems have been sheared clean and discarded.



Use a shearing movement to separate thyme leaves from the woody stems.

Enhanced? Not Really

More than half of the fresh pork sold in supermarkets is now "enhanced." Enhanced pork is injected with a salt solution to make lean cuts, such as center-cut roasts and chops, seem moister. But we think natural pork has a better flavor and a quick 1-hour brine adds plenty of moisture. We recommend buying natural pork.

Manufacturers don't use the terms "enhanced" or "natural" on package labels, but if the pork has been enhanced it will have an ingredient list, like the one below. Natural pork contains just pork and won't have an ingredient list.



To determine if pork is "enhanced," look for an ingredient list on the label.

The Best Salt for the Job

For most recipes, the test kitchen has found that inexpensive table salt is just as good as fancy salts. The fine granules are more easily dispersed in batters and doughs, so it's our top choice for baking. We also rely on table salt for soups, stews, sauces, and more. Once salt dissolves, it all tastes pretty much the same, so why waste money on pricey sea salt to season a pot of pasta cooking water? But when it comes to seasoning meat, we don't think table salt is up to the job. The tiny grains slip from our fingers in an uncontrolled manner, creating uneven salt paths and patchy flavor-

ing. This came especially to light during our testing for Steak Frites (page 9). We found that larger-grained salts (such as kosher salt) are easier to control and cling nicely to the meat's surface. When a recipe calls for seasoning meat "to taste," we suggest about 1/8 teaspoon of kosher salt per portion of meat. Kosher salt is inexpensive and readily available, so pick up a box for seasoning meat, chicken, or fish.

Chinese Green Beans

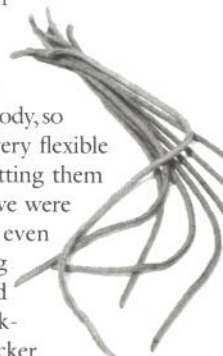
Long beans, also called yard-long or snake beans, are the traditional choice in Chinese stir-fries and other recipes, including Sichuan Green Beans (page 21). These thin, pliable pods can grow up to three feet long. They certainly look exotic, but are these specialty beans worth seeking out at an Asian market?

To find out, we purchased beans from several sources. We found that older, thicker beans can be woody, so look for thin, very flexible beans. After cutting them down to size, we were surprised that even super-thin long beans required the same cooking time as thicker green beans.

The long beans were chewier and less sweet than green beans, with a nice nutty flavor. If you find long beans, give them a try—even though our tasters were just as happy with plain old green beans from the supermarket.

The Perfect Foil

Regular 12-inch-wide foil is fine for many kitchen tasks, but there are times when it's too narrow and we find ourselves trying to crimp together two sheets to create a single piece. On these occasions, it's much easier to reach for a roll of 18-inch foil. This extra-wide foil is perfect for lining large pans (see 15-Minute



LONG BEANS

The Chinese answer to long beans is surprisingly nutty and chewy.

EQUIPMENT TESTING: Tart Pans

Imagine your disappointment if a French Onion and Bacon Tart (page 19) crumbled as you attempted to liberate it from its pan. During our testing of seven tart pans, we had this unfortunate experience with onion as well as fruit tarts, so it pays to choose your tart pan carefully.

Tart pans can be divided into three basic categories based on materials: tinned steel (the classic choice), nonstick, and everything else—ranging from heavy ceramic to floppy silicone. What ceramic, as in the Baker's Catalogue Bake-and-Serve Stoneware (\$14.96), added in tabletop aesthetics, it quickly lost in practicality—the lack of a removable bottom forced us to chisel the delicate tart from the pan with a sharp knife. The equally flawed, Gumby-like SiliconeZone 10-Inch Tart Pan (\$18) required us to bend the pan to pop out our now-cracked pastry.

Because tart pastry is mostly butter, the nonstick surfaces on three of the remaining pans were not only redundant but also unfavorably slick. Without some tackiness, the dough slumped unevenly down the fluted edges of the Calphalon Classic Bakeware Nonstick 10-Inch Round Tart Pan (\$19.99), Kaiser Noblesse 9 1/2-Inch Quiche Pan with Removable Base (\$14.95), and Nordic Ware 8-Inch Quiche Tart Pan (\$13.99).

Tarts baked in the two tinned steel pans—the Kaiser Tinplate 9-Inch Quiche Pan with Removable Bottom (\$9) and the Cooking.com Round Tart Pan, 9.5-Inch (\$7.95)—browned evenly and released effortlessly. In this case, the classic design is still the best.

—Elizabeth Bomze



TIN WINS

For buttery tart pastry, stick with tinned steel pans, like this one sold by Kaiser Tinplate.