

## Victoria Sponge recipe

As a child, Sunday tea would always consist of my grandmother's Victoria sponge. Every week as the family dived in, the delicious freshly baked cake would be demolished, and my grandfather, enjoying his ritual Sunday afternoon nap would miss out. But despite there never being enough, my grandmother never made more than one. So before making this sponge, be warned who you invite around for tea!

225g (8oz) unsalted butter or margarine  
225g (8oz) castor sugar or vanilla sugar (rose petal sugar)  
4 large eggs  
225g (8oz) self raising flour  
1 tsp baking powder  
2 tblsp of milk or water to add if necessary

### For the filling

425ml (3/4 pint) whipped cream  
sugar  
strawberry jam

2 x 20cm (8 inch) sandwich tins

### Instructions:

Before you do anything else, pre-heat the oven to 182 degrees C/360 degrees F/Gas mark 4\_. Prepare two 20cm (8inch) sandwich tins by greasing them thoroughly and lining the base with non stick parchment. Make sure that all the ingredients are at room temperature.

Place the butter in a mixing bowl and beat it until it is pale and light. Add the sugar and continue beating until it's light and fluffy. Break the eggs into a separate bowl and beat them lightly. Add the eggs a spoon at a time to the batter mix, beating in each addition thoroughly before adding the next. Sift the flour and baking powder together. Use a large metal spoon, fold in the sieved flour to the egg and butter mixture. The mix should now be ready.

Divide the mixture equally between the two prepared tins. Tap the tins down gently to expel any large air pockets and level the cakes. Place into the pre-heated oven for 25-30 minutes.

When ready, cool on a cooling wire rack and remove the baking parchment. When completely cool, prepare the filling with the strawberry jam and cream and sandwich the two sponges together. The beauty about a simple cake like this is that you can decorate it any way you like.

But for this recipe, dust the cake with rose petal scented icing sugar and decorate the cake with crystallised rose petals.

### **Alan's tips**

- If the mix is soft enough to drop easily off a spoon tapped gently at the side of the bowl it is ready to bake. If it is too dry add a little milk.
- Try using some vanilla sugar. Put a vanilla pod in some castor sugar about three weeks before using. The castor sugar will take in all that lovely flavour and give a nice flavour to your sponge. You can add other flavoured sugars instead of vanilla. Lemon sugar, cinnamon sugar, cardamon sugar, rose petal sugar are good examples
- If your mixture curdles don't worry. A little bit too much egg is in there fighting against the fat, so stick a spoonful of flour in and mix it together. This should absorb all that excess liquid that's separated it in the first place and that will bring it all together into a nice mixture.
- Be very careful not to open the oven or to bang it while the cakes are baking as it won't help your sponges at all.

You know the sponges are cooked when they feel firm and springy in the centre. A good way of testing is to give it a gentle poke in the middle and if it springs back then it's ready. The other one is to place a skewer or a knife into the centre and if it comes out clean then you know that it's done.

### **The Science**

#### **Preparation**

Always pre-heat the oven, because you want the cake to start to cook and set as soon as you put it in. If you don't there's a risk that the air bubbles that form in the mixture will get too big and will join together before the cake sets. You could end up with a cake full of holes.

#### **Getting everything right**

Making Victoria sponges is an amazingly sensitive sensitive procedure. In fact, some oven manufacturers have been known to test their new ovens out by baking a Victoria sponge in them. To start with, even the kind of cake-tin you use can make a difference. Don't use a shiny tin because it reflects too much of the heat energy away, and it can take about a fifth of the time longer for the cake to bake. Instead, use a dull-surfaced, matt tin, ideally black. Avoid tins with really high sides too, as they block out some of the heat energy and stop it getting in. Fill the tin only to about three-quarters of the height, so there's space for the cake to rise without it flopping over the edge..

## **Essential Ingredients**

### **Fats**

Creaming the fat is a key stage in cake making - it's not just so that it mixes easily with the other ingredients. The creaming power of the fat actually determines the cake's ultimate structure. The fat contains tiny crystals that trap air pockets in the mixture and really contribute to making the cake light. Margarine crystals are smaller than butter crystals, and smaller crystals trap smaller pockets of air. So margarine gives a slightly finer texture than butter. So, scientifically speaking, margarine is slightly better than butter for a Victoria sponge. But if you like the taste of butter more, it works well enough. Whatever fat you choose, never melt it because you lose *all* the crystals, and you won't trap any air at all. And don't use low fat spreads; they contain lots of water instead of fat, which won't trap air bubbles either.

### **Sugar and eggs**

Use castor sugar rather than granulated sugar; its fine texture helps to keep the sponge light. The eggs contain the proteins which hold the cake together, they set (coagulate) once you start cooking them, and that holds the cake structure and all the air bubbles in place.

### **Flour**

And finally, it's more important than you might imagine to use self raising flour rather than plain flour. I never used to worry too much about this - I'd just bung some baking powder into plain flour if I didn't have self-raising. But plain flour's just got much too much gluten in, and gluten's the stuff that gives bread that really strong, tough structure. Here we want a light fluffy delicate texture, so avoid the gluten. Another function of the fat in the cake is to separate the flour particles and interfere with the network the gluten makes, making it weaker, and making the cake more tender.

### **Mixing**

Electric whisks and food processors revolutionised cake making, saving people from the labourious process of creaming the fat and sugar. It's best to use speeds that are similar to the speed that you would mix things by hand. Food mixers are specially designed to get as much air in as possible, so they're great. But be quite gentle once you put the flour in; you don't want the gluten to start developing, or your cake will get tough.

### **See the transformation**

When you take the cake out of the oven, it should be a gorgeous golden brown. The fat's now melted, the air bubbles in the cake have expanded and the protein in the egg has set, locking everything in place. Turn out the cakes quite quickly, so the steam can escape, to avoid ending up with a soggy-bottomed cake.

### **High Altitude cakes...**

Did you know that Victoria sponge cakes are so sensitive they actually cook differently at high altitudes, and need you to change the amounts of ingredients used? At high altitudes, the air pressure is lower (there's a thinner layer of air above you when you're high up, so the pressure it exerts is lower). But the raising agents work just the same, and the same amount of gas is produced. Since they have less pressure to 'fight against', they form bigger bubbles, and cakes over-rise. The air bubbles get too big and can burst. To deal with the problem you just have to reduce amount of baking powder, so less air is produced (by an eighth at 1000m, by a quarter at 2000m) and increase the temperature that you cook at, say by 15°C.

Also, water starts to evaporate off earlier (not only because it boils at a lower temperature at low pressures but we're also now cooking at a higher temperature) and the sugar gets more concentrated. So add some more water (about 2 tablespoons a cup per 1000m), and decrease the sugar too (by about 2 tablespoons a cup per 1000m).