

*creativity*



# Comfort in the kitchen

*The simple act of baking can help to ground us  
in the present and connect us with happy memories  
from the past, a sure way to lift our mood*

*Words: Siobhan Mason*

There is something so warming and comforting about the aroma of baking; the feeling of cosiness and contentment it creates really can lift our spirits. Add to this the sensory act of making something with our hands and the mindful nature of following a recipe, and baking is a sure way to boost our mental wellbeing.

Like other creative activities, such as painting or crocheting, baking can help us achieve a state of 'flow', a complete connection with the present moment. When we're carefully measuring ingredients, sifting flour, kneading bread or whisking a cake mixture to the right consistency, we're generally not worrying about the state of the world or fretting about things beyond our control.

For Jane Mackintosh, 38, a project manager in a high-pressured environment, baking at the weekend is her way to unwind, switch off and let go of stress. "I like weighing and preparing things and listening to the radio," she says.

"I find there's something very calming in an activity like baking that requires me to focus on the instructions. The only thing that comes close to that feeling is playing sport, where I need to focus on what I'm doing and can't think about anything else. In the kitchen I focus on the here and now, calm my ongoing mind-chatter and enjoy the feeling of creating something tangible. I read an article on the experience of flow and I think that's what I get when I bake."

It is. We achieve flow state when we're fully immersed in what we're doing, when we're enjoying the process so much that we lose sense of space and time. As long as we haven't got Paul Hollywood leaning over our shoulder, or Sandi Toksvig shouting 'five minutes left,' baking can be a fast route to this flow state. Flow is also more likely to occur when the challenge we set ourselves matches our skill level, a fact worth bearing in mind when you decide whether to opt for cupcakes or a three-tiered showstopper! ▶



Photography: Taylor Kleier

Baking is a sensory experience – choose cinnamon, citrus or vanilla flavours for aromatic effect.

## Better carrot cake

*This vegan, free-from carrot cake is rich, moist and delicious, and a go-to for any guests eating a restricted diet*

### METHOD

**1** Heat the oven to 160°C/325°F. Grease a 900g/2lb loaf tin and line it with baking paper.

**2** Combine the carrots, apple or sweet potato, coconut, coconut oil, sunflower oil, agave, yacon syrup and vanilla in a bowl and set aside.

**3** Combine the dry ingredients in a second bowl and whisk together to evenly distribute them. Whisk in the carrot mixture.

**4** Gradually pour in the hot water and citrus extract and mix to a smooth batter. Pour into the prepared tin.

**5** Bake in the oven for 55-65 minutes, or until a skewer inserted into the centre of the cake comes out clean. Turn out of the loaf tin and allow to cool completely. Decorate with vanilla icing.

*Recipe note: Baking with these ingredients takes some getting used to – the mixture will have a different consistency from a traditional wheat-based cake – but the results are well worth the effort.*

The sensory aspect of baking is also part of its uplifting effect. Baking has its own wonderful scents due to the volatile organic aromas released in the chemical reaction going on in the oven. This can, of course, be enhanced by other aromatic ingredients or spices such as citrus, vanilla, cinnamon or ginger. “I love all-spice and ginger in recipes,” says Jane. “I especially love a rich, treacly gingerbread for the beautiful smell it makes as it bakes on a winter’s evening.”

Vanilla – an oft-used addition to cakes, whether in extract or pod form – is known to be calming. Some studies say it reduces the ‘startle’ reflex. Others say its comforting properties are due to the fact that it evokes strong childhood memories.

Keen baker Sarah Richardson, 47, has many fond memories of baking with her mum, who died of cancer when Sarah was in her late twenties. “It takes me back to when I used to help her bake – and lick the bowl ▶

### INGREDIENTS

W F G F D F V V E  
SERVES 8-10

- \* 250g (9oz) carrots, peeled and grated
- \* 50g (2oz) apple or sweet potato, peeled and grated
- \* 50g (2oz) desiccated coconut
- \* 50g (2oz) coconut oil, melted
- \* 50ml sunflower oil, plus extra for greasing
- \* 120ml agave nectar
- \* 1½ tsp yacon syrup (optional)
- \* 2 tsp vanilla extract
- \* 70g (2½oz) polenta flour
- \* 140g (5oz) gluten-free plain flour
- \* 1 tsp xanthan gum
- \* 1 tsp bicarbonate of soda (baking soda)
- \* ½ tsp sea salt
- \* 1½ tsp ground cinnamon
- \* 1 tsp ground ginger
- \* 180ml hot water
- \* ½ tsp mandarin, lemon or orange extract
- \* 1 quantity vegan vanilla icing (see our recipe on page 89)



**KEY**

*WF*  
WHEAT FREE

*GF*  
GLUTEN FREE

*DF*  
DAIRY FREE

*V*  
VEGETARIAN

*VE*  
VEGAN

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Focus on your movements to turn kneading bread into a mindfulness practice.

out,” she says, “which is a comforting memory for me.” Sarah, an interior designer, now creates memories for her own daughter, Chloe, and still enjoys licking the bowl – unless Chloe beats her to it.

Baking also taps into our sense of touch. If we tap away at a keyboard in an office and spend the evenings swiping our fingers along a smooth screen device, our lives can become almost entirely virtual and devoid of texture. Baking is a chance to get hands-on, and get messy, rubbing butter and flour together or creaming butter and sugar; while kneading, stretching and folding dough is an immensely physical experience that can help to disperse stress hormones and release excess tension.

“I knead bread by hand, which is strangely meditative,” agrees Jane, “but I use an electric mixer for making cakes. I think the effect is the same, but maybe it’s cheating slightly.” It’s not cheating, of course, and is a more realistic option if we’re time-poor, but it can be therapeutic to go back to the old ways every now and then.

Baking can also be a way to express ourselves and flex our creative muscles. It gives us the chance to conceive an idea and see it through to the end, playing with different shapes, colours and textures along the way.

“I often challenge myself to try something new and make better celebration cakes than previous years,” says Sarah. “I enjoy the decorating part best as that’s where I feel I can get my creative juices flowing. Last year, for the first time ever, I made sugar paste roses for my mum-in-law’s 80th birthday. I found it really relaxing and therapeutic. I was in my own little world for a whole afternoon. This was rare and bliss.”

Decorating is not everyone’s favourite part of the process. “I am ▶



## Vegan vanilla icing

*This versatile vegan icing can be prepared in advance and used to top occasion cakes or cupcakes*

### METHOD

**1** With a hand blender or in a food processor, combine the soya milk, almond milk powder, agave and vanilla extract. Blend until smooth. Add the scraped seeds from the vanilla pod.

**2** Combine the melted coconut oil with the orange and lemon juice and add to the mixture gradually, blending until smooth. Add the cashew nut butter and again blend until smooth.

**3** Chill overnight before using so that the coconut oil solidifies. Remove from the fridge 30 minutes to 1 hour before using, to soften.

### INGREDIENTS

WFGDFVVE

- \* 350ml (12.3 fl oz) unsweetened soya milk
- \* 100g (3½oz) almond milk powder (not ground almonds)
- \* 50ml (1.75 fl oz) agave nectar
- \* 2 tsp vanilla extract
- \* Seeds from 1 vanilla pod
- \* 340g (12oz) coconut oil, melted
- \* 2 tbsp fresh orange or clementine juice
- \* 1 tsp fresh lemon juice
- \* 75g (2½oz) cashew nut butter

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Photography: StevenJoyce

## Cherry & almond slice

*This cake tastes like the lovechild of a lemon drizzle and a cherry bakewell. Perfect for the indecisive amongst us!*

### METHOD

**1** Heat the oven to 180°C/350°F and line a 25x25cm (10x10in) deep baking tin with baking paper.

**2** In a large bowl, beat together the butter and sugar until fluffy and smooth. Beat in the eggs, one at a time, then beat in the almond extract until well combined. Add the polenta, ground almonds and baking powder and fold in until well combined.

**3** Scrape the mixture out into the lined tin and evenly sprinkle the sour cherries and pistachios over the surface of the batter, reserving about one-third of the pistachios for decorating.

**4** Bake for 25-30 minutes, until just beginning to turn pale golden. Remove from the oven and let cool in the tin.

**5** Meanwhile, combine the milk, lemon juice and icing sugar in a small saucepan and heat, whisking all the time, until the syrup is warm and no lumps of sugar remain.

**6** Brush the hot syrup over the still-warm cake and sprinkle the reserved pistachios over the surface. Let the cake completely cool and set, then turn out of the tin and cut into slices or squares.

not a massive fan of icing,” says Jane. “So for me, cream, mascarpone or cream cheese frosting for carrot cake are as close as I get to decoration. But I love the process of creating something that’s beautiful and practical that people will enjoy.”

“A cake is a symbol of love and friendship,” wrote Delia Smith back in 1977 in her *Book of Cakes* (Hodder & Stoughton). “If someone actually goes to the trouble of baking a cake specially for family and friends, they can’t fail to feel spoiled and cared for.”

Baking can be an act of self care, too. “In difficult times, it’s easy to eat badly and on the run, which can tell ➤

### INGREDIENTS

WFGFV  
MAKES 14

- \* 200g (7oz) salted butter, at room temperature
- \* 200g (7oz) golden caster sugar
- \* 2 large eggs
- \* ¼ tsp almond extract
- \* 200g (7oz) fine polenta
- \* 100g (3½oz) ground almonds
- \* ¼ tsp gluten-free baking powder
- \* 200g (7oz) fresh sour cherries, pitted (frozen will also work)
- \* 30g (1oz) pistachios, roughly chopped
- \* 4 tsp milk
- \* 4 tsp lemon juice
- \* 70g (2½oz) icing sugar

# Sugar-free vanilla cupcakes

*Top these light and flavourful cupcakes with vegan vanilla icing, and if you don't like the flavour of coconut you can replace the coconut flour with ground almonds*

## METHOD

**1** Heat the oven to 170°C/340°F, and line a 12-hole muffin tin with silicone or paper cases.

**2** Put the gluten-free flour, potato flour, coconut flour, flax meal (if using) and sea salt into a large bowl. Use a balloon whisk or sieve to mix them together.

**3** In another bowl, combine the melted coconut oil, agave nectar, vanilla extract and rice milk. In a small bowl, mix together the bicarbonate of soda (baking soda) and boiling water and then stir this into the other liquid ingredients.

**4** Pour a third of the liquid ingredients into the dry mixture and whisk together to make a batter, gradually adding the remaining liquid until all of it is incorporated.

**5** Spoon the mixture into the paper cases and bake in the oven for 20–25 minutes, or until a skewer inserted in the centre of a cupcake comes out clean. Eat as they are, or top with vegan vanilla icing once cool. These cakes are best eaten on the day they are made.

**Recipe note:** *The flax meal can be left out if you can't find it but it adds nutrition, texture and a nutty quality.*

## INGREDIENTS

W F G F D F V V E

MAKES 12

- \* 280g (10oz) gluten-free self-raising flour
- \* 100g (3½oz) potato flour (or cornflour if you can't find potato)
- \* 70g (2½oz) coconut flour (fine desiccated coconut)
- \* 1 tbsp flax meal (optional)
- \* 1½ tsp sea salt
- \* 150g (5oz) coconut oil, melted
- \* 250ml agave nectar
- \* 2 tbsp vanilla extract
- \* 150ml rice milk
- \* ½ tsp bicarbonate of soda (baking soda)
- \* 100ml boiling water





us subconsciously that we are not worth looking after,” says Jane. “I think making the effort to bake when times are tough can be a way to show myself I am worthy of being cared for.”

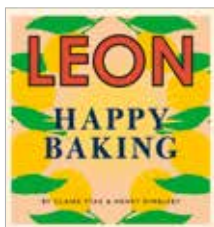
Author Marian Keyes used baking to help her through a period of depression. Her book, *Saved by Cake* (Penguin) is part recipe book, part autobiography, as she shares how baking helped her get through each day when depression threatened to overwhelm her.

Some of the recipes are simple and some aren't, she says, “because sometimes I needed something really complicated to focus on because I couldn't bear being in my own head.”

Whether we're whipping up a simple sponge cake or making an elaborate gâteau, each stage of baking is a transformation: the way the consistency of the cake mixture changes in your hands, how dough doubles in size after proving, and the way a cake batter metamorphoses in the oven to end up as something so much greater than the sum of its parts.

Something that starts as a sloppy mess can – with love, care and time – be transformed into something beautiful and delicious. It seems like a lovely metaphor for life. It may just be simple science, but it feels closer to magic.

Experiment for yourself with these four delicious bakes to suit any diet, from *LEON Happy Baking*. All of the recipes are gluten free, and two are also dairy free and vegan. 🌱



Recipes from *LEON Happy Baking* by Claire Ptak and Henry Dimbleby (Conran Octopus, £16.99), a collection of over 100 delicious bakes.

## LEON pecan pie

*This sweet and simple gluten-free pecan tart is a favourite in LEON restaurants*

### METHOD

**1** Cream together the butter and sugar with a wooden spoon, or in a free-standing electric mixer, until smooth.

**2** Add the egg and egg yolk and mix until fully incorporated. Add the flour and quickly bring it together in a ball. Wrap and refrigerate for 30 minutes.

**3** Butter a 23-25cm (9-10in) fluted flan tin. Roll the pastry out on a floured surface to about 3-5mm thick and line your tart case with it. Trim the edges and chill in the fridge for 30 minutes. Meanwhile, heat the oven to 160°C/325°F.

**4** Line the chilled pastry case with baking paper, and fill it with baking beans. Bake in the oven for 20 minutes then remove the baking beans. Return to the oven and bake for a further 5 minutes. The pastry should be a nice blonde colour. Set aside to cool.

**5** Put the butter and golden syrup into a medium saucepan over a low heat. When it becomes runny, take it off the heat and whisk in the sugar.

**6** In a small bowl, whisk the cornflour and eggs until smooth, then add to the saucepan. Fill the pastry with the pecan halves. Pour the syrup mixture on top and fill it up to just below the edge of the case. Put into the oven, taking great care not to spill any liquid over the sides.

**7** Bake for about 40 minutes, or until the tart is dark golden in colour and has slightly risen in the middle. Leave to cool in the tin.

### INGREDIENTS

WGFV

SERVES 8-10

#### For the sweet pastry

- \* 150g (5oz) butter
- \* 100g (3½oz) caster sugar
- \* 1 free-range egg, plus 1 yolk
- \* 270g (9½oz) gluten-free plain flour

#### For the filling

- \* 50g (2oz) butter
- \* 225g (8oz) golden syrup
- \* 2 tbspcaster sugar
- \* 1 tsp cornflour (cornstarch)
- \* 2 large free-range eggs
- \* 200g (7oz) pecan nut halves



Baking can be a deeply personal experience, but each sweet slice tastes best shared.