

A HISTORY OF BROWNIES

Was it a failed chocolate cake or a purposely concocted idea? Like the ingredients in your favorite bakery's decadent chocolate desserts, mystery and intrigue surround the birth of brownies!

Some attribute the first brownie to Mildred Brown Schrupf. Mildred (affectionately known as "Brownie") was a Maine home economist, nutritionist, newspaper columnist, food judge, author, and, of course, cook. Were brownies her invention?

Others assert that the American favorite was first mentioned in an 1897 Sears-Roebuck catalog, in a reference to mail-order chocolate candies named after cartoon elves created in a book series that began with *The Brownies: Their Book*.

Most often, however, sources tempt your brownie curiosity and quiz-show skills by telling you that the earliest recipes appear in *The Boston Cooking School Cookbook*, published in 1906.

Let's follow the crumb trail, however, back to Mildred Brown Schrupf and the state of Maine. A note in *Betty Crocker's Baking Classics*, circa 1979, claims that Bangor Brownies (as in Bangor, Maine) are probably the original chocolate brownies. According to this classic cookbook, legend has it that a Maine housewife was baking a chocolate cake and it fell (not on the floor, but deflated!). Instead of discarding it, this frugal cook cut the collapsed cake into bars and served it—to nothing short of rave reviews. (It's an intriguing baking myth—but a little hard to swallow. How did she know how to make that collapsed cake again?!)

Whatever the true origins, brownies didn't become popular until the 1920s, coinciding with the mass production, availability, and affordability of chocolate.

And there's no stopping our brownie baking and creativity now!

BAKING BASICS

Many of you probably *did not* grow up baking and cooking in the kitchen with your mom or dad. I'm aware of this from teaching Basic Baking and Basic Cookery classes. This chapter is for you—tips that will help ensure success and help you become enthusiastic about the art and pleasure of scratch baking.

I know, I know—time is short. So is life! Don't waste it on eating poor-quality brownies.

If you keep a few basics in your pantry, you'll have what it takes to whip up brownies in no time flat. And if you have kids, invite them into the kitchen with you to share in the fun, the mess, the measuring, the scooping, the baking, and the cleanup—all with the final reward of great taste and time well spent! No kids? Share the fun with friends or a spouse.

Are you an experienced baker? It's always good to review, if for nothing more than the pleasure of saying, "Yeah, I know that!"

I'm a real believer in *mise en place*—a French term that refers to having all ingredients necessary for baking or cooking prepared (i.e., chopped or toasted) and ready to combine (i.e., measured) up to the point of baking or cooking. I emphasize and reemphasize this to all my students. All things measured and ready eliminates surprises such as not enough sugar, only one egg, no buttermilk, etc., and forces you to reread the recipe instructions when ready to bake or cook.

LOTS OF MY RECIPES SAY . . .

Nuts, toasted: Toast pecans, walnuts, almonds, and other nuts in a dry skillet over low heat until fragrant, watching carefully so they don't burn. (This process only takes a few minutes.) Yes, you could also do this in a 325-degree or higher oven on a cookie sheet, but I find a dry skillet so much more convenient.

Do not overbake: Why? Brownies become dry and hard when overbaked. Underset your timer, be sure your oven temperature is accurate, and test your brownies for doneness. A brownie that's just right will be moist and flavorful. So bake those brownies, as it states, "until a cake tester or toothpick inserted . . . comes out with a few moist crumbs attached."

Softened to room temperature: This *does not* mean melted. Take your butter or cream cheese or whatever the recipe calls for out of the refrigerator 30 minutes before using, to soften. Adding melted ingredients to a Brownie Base will cause textural changes in the final product.

Divided: When you're getting your ingredients ready (remember *mise en place!*), it's much easier to know in advance that you need to divide up the butter (and cut it while it's cold) for separate uses in the same recipe, or divide up the chocolate (and weigh it in appropriate batches while the scale is out).

Unsalted butter: I use unsalted butter because it provides a better mouth feel (and overall flavor), you can control the amount of salt in a recipe (all manufacturers of salted butter have a different standard), and it lets the cows know I'm a purist!

MY WRITING STYLE

I've tried to anticipate your questions (this comes from years of culinary teaching) and keep things simple. Even recipes with many steps are written in an easy-to-understand manner. I like to throw in a sarcastic/humorous remark now and again . . . in case you're forgetting to enjoy the experience and smile!

THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW

Measure ingredients accurately and follow instructions carefully. Baking offers less room for interpretation than do other forms of cooking.

Use a good thermometer to check the oven temperature. Ovens are often inaccurately calibrated, which accounts for many baking problems.

Use an accurate kitchen scale. Buy one that is very accurate and weighs in ounces and grams and, if possible, goes up to one pound. Be sure the ounce and gram marks are easy to read. Lots of recipes call for one ounce of this and that. Weighing ingredients should not require a magnifying glass!

Use the pan size called for unless you are an experienced baker and know how to make the necessary adjustments. (My husband, John, does this for me—his degree is in math!)

Store pecans, walnuts, almonds, and other nuts in the refrigerator and freezer to prevent them from going rancid. Toast when using to add that crunch again.

Separate egg whites and yolks carefully, since a speck of fatty yolk in the whites will prevent them from whipping to maximum volume. (The best way to separate an egg is to carefully pour the egg into your clean hand and let the white run through your fingers.) Eggs separate best when chilled but whip best at room temperature.

Measure flour by spooning it into a dry measuring cup and leveling it off with a knife. Don't pack it down.

To line a pan with foil the easy way, turn the pan upside down on the counter. Center a piece of foil (larger than the pan) over the pan. Fold the edges of the foil down over the four sides of the pan, folding the corners

neatly as though wrapping a package. Slip the foil off the pan. Turn the pan right side up and press the foil (*gently*) into the pan, smoothing it across the bottom, into the corners, and up the sides.

To grease a pan, use a paper towel, pastry brush, waxed paper, or your clean fingers and lightly coat the inside bottom and sides of the pan with softened butter or shortening. I prefer these two choices to sprays. You'll get more even results and no aftertaste.

Make your own pure vanilla extract! Buy a 375-milliliter bottle of 80 proof, moderately priced vodka (such as Smirnoff). Cut two vanilla beans in half crosswise (resulting in four pieces) and place all four pieces into the bottle of vodka. Label and let steep in a cool place (out of direct light) for over four weeks or until the vanilla smells right. You will see little flecks of vanilla seeds floating in the vodka. Do not be alarmed; this is a great thing! Also, you will notice that your "vanilla" does not become excessively dark. That's because there is no coloring in it. It's pure and natural. Leave the beans in the bottle until you use up all the liquid. My preference for type of vanilla bean is Madagascar Bourbon beans, for maximum flavor. Homemade extract makes a wonderful gift for someone who loves to bake.

MEASURING

Baking is both an art and a science. To satisfy the scientific part, you must be accurate and consistent when measuring ingredients. Not all ingredients are measured the same way.

Yes, Virginia, there *is* a difference between dry and liquid measuring cups!

A dry measuring cup is a straight-sided, graduated cup with a handle attached at the top lip. The most common sizes are $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{3}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, 1, and 2 cups. They are used to measure a standard amount of dry ingredients (such as flour, sugar, brown sugar, etc.).

Granulated or confectioners' sugar should be spooned into a dry measuring cup and leveled off. Brown sugar, on the other hand, should be pressed firmly into a dry measure so it holds the shape of the cup when it is turned out (this is referred to as "firmly packed").

Proper measuring of flour is critical. Too much flour can cause baked goods to turn out dry. To measure flour, stir it in the bag or container to lighten it. Gently spoon flour into a dry measuring cup or a measuring spoon. Level it off at the top with a straight-edged utensil.

A liquid measuring cup is clear, hard plastic or glass with a lip for pouring. The cup is usually a pint or quart measuring tool marked with lines to measure liquid ingredients. The lines will mark ounces, milliliters, and $\frac{1}{8}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{3}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{2}{3}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, and 1 cup or more. Liquid ingredients should be measured in this cup, with the cup placed on a flat, level surface for accuracy.

When liquid is measured in a measuring spoon, fill the spoon to the top

but don't let it spill over. Don't pour liquid ingredients over the other ingredients, in case you spill!

Should you chop before or after you measure? Simply check the way the ingredient is listed. For example, if it says *3 tbsp. walnuts, coarsely chopped*, the action is after the amount, so measure—then chop. If, however, it says *3 tbsp. coarsely chopped walnuts*, the action is before the amount, so (you guessed it) chop—then measure.

The same is true with sifting. For example, if it says *1½ cups confectioners' sugar, sifted*, the action is after the amount, so measure—then sift.

Butter is measured in its solid (stick) form. One stick of butter is equal to 8 tbsp. ($\frac{1}{2}$ cup); two sticks equal 16 tbsp. (1 cup). One pound of butter is equal to 32 tbsp. (2 cups). Butter sticks are usually wrapped in paper with preprinted graduated tablespoon markings.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Here are explanations of terms and ingredients if you've never baked before. (I've always taught my students that no question is too basic if you don't know the answer.) Refer to my chapter "Ingredient Preferences and Sources" to find a few of my choices.

All-purpose flour: Wheat flour milled from hard wheat or a blend of soft and hard wheat. May be used in a variety of baked goods and pasta making.

All-purpose flour, unbleached: Flour that is bleached naturally as it ages; no maturing agents are used in the milling process.

Arrowroot: The starchy product of the tropical tuber of the same name, the roots of which are dried and ground into a very fine powder. Used as a thickening agent, it is absolutely tasteless and becomes clear when cooked.

Bakeware: Made in a range of materials: aluminum, tin, stainless steel, black steel, glass, and pottery. Both the material and finish affect the final product. Shiny bakeware reflects heat, slowing the browning process. On the other hand, dark and dull-finish bakeware absorbs more heat, increasing the amount of browning.

Baking powder: A leavening agent containing both baking soda and one or two acids—citric or tartaric. Double acting is used in home kitchens because it has two types of acid—one reacts when liquids are added in the bowl and the other reacts when it becomes hot during baking. Don't know if the baking powder that's been in your cupboard forever is still good? Test for strength by mixing 1 tsp. baking powder with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup very hot water. The mixture should bubble furiously if the powder is all right.

Baking soda (bicarbonate of soda): Creates carbon dioxide when mixed in a batter with liquid and acidic ingredients (such as sour milk or buttermilk, lemon or orange juice, vinegar, honey, or chocolate). The reaction begins as soon as the liquids are added to the dry ingredients in the bowl.

Batter: A mixture usually made with flour and a liquid. Batters vary in consistency from thin enough to pour to thick enough to drop from a spoon.

Beat: Make a smooth mixture by whipping or stirring with a wire whisk, spoon, old-fashioned egg beater, or electric mixer.

Blend: Mix two or more ingredients together with a spoon, wire whisk, electric mixer, blender, or food processor.

Bloom: Pale, grayish streaks or blotches on the surface of chocolate indicating the cocoa butter has separated from the chocolate. This means the chocolate was stored in too warm an environment, but it can still be used. (Store chocolate, well wrapped, in a cool, dry place away from direct sunlight and heat.)

Butter: Produced by churning cream into a semisolid form. By the U.S. standard definition, it is 80 percent milk fat, with the remaining 20 percent consisting of water and milk solids. Butter may be salted or unsalted (sweet) and is valued by most bakers for its irreplaceable flavor and ability to create crispness and tenderness.

Cake flour: Fine-textured, silky flour milled from soft wheat. Cake flour has a low-protein content for making cakes, cookies, and pastries with a soft crumb. It should always be sifted before using.

Caramelize: Heat and stir sugar until it melts and turns a golden brown.

Combine: Mix together.

Confectioners' sugar or powdered sugar: A granulated sugar that has been crushed into a fine powder. A small amount (about 3 percent) of cornstarch is added to some brands to prevent clumping.

Cooling rack: A rectangular grid of thick wire with "feet" that raise it above the countertop. Used to cool cakes, cookies, brownies, and other baked goods when they come out of the oven, allowing air to circulate around the pan (top and bottom) to prevent moisture from forming and making the baked goods soggy.

Cream: Use a wire whisk, electric mixer, or large spoon to mix fats (butter or other shortening) and sugars together until light and smooth in appearance.

Drizzle: To pour a liquid (such as a glaze) in a random pattern in a thin stream over food.

Electric mixer: A machine to make life easier in the kitchen. Handheld electric mixers are perfect for light jobs (like whipping cream); stand electric mixers (such as Kitchen Aid) are perfect for heavy-duty jobs and long mixing periods. They also work perfectly for whipping cream.

Food processor: A machine that can blend, chop and puree, slice and shred, mix batters, and blend pastry.

Framboise: Liqueur with a raspberry flavor. (The word is French for raspberry.)

Frost: Apply a sweet topping to a brownie, cake, or cookie. The topping is soft enough to spread but stiff enough to hold its shape.

Ganache: A rich chocolate icing usually made with bittersweet chocolate and heavy (whipping) cream. Ganache, once made and cooled to lukewarm, is poured over a brownie, cake, or torte for a satiny, glossy finish.

Glaze: A thin, glossy coating on a food.

Grand Marnier: French liqueur with a Cognac base, flavored with bitter orange peel.

Grease: Coat a baking pan or skillet with a thin layer of fat or oil.

Instant espresso powder: Available at most supermarkets, the intense flavor of this quick-dissolving powder is perfect for adding a coffee kick to brownies. I prefer to buy imported Italian brands.

Insulated baking pans: Metal bakeware constructed of two layers separated by an insulating cushion of air. Benefits include more even baking with less bottom-crust browning.

Jellyroll pan: A rectangular baking pan that features a 1" edge and is most commonly 13x18" or 15½ x 10½" in size.

Kirsch: Liqueur with a cherry flavor. (The word is German for cherry.)

Marble: Gently swirl one food into another; usually done with light and dark batters for brownies or cakes.

Mix: Stir, usually with a spoon or spatula, until the ingredients are well combined (individual ingredients can no longer be seen or identified).

Pipe: Force a semisoft food, such as frosting or whipped cream, through a pastry bag to decorate.

Sauté pan: A wide pan with straight or minimally curved sides; similar in looks (except the sides are higher) to a frying pan.

Sift: Put one or several dry ingredients through a sifter or sieve to remove lumps and make batter smoother.

Spread: Distribute an ingredient in a thin layer over the surface of another item.

Springform pan: A cake pan whose bottom and sides are removed from the baked cake by means of a spring or hinge, so there is no need to invert the cake.

Sprinkle: Scatter bits of topping over a surface (e.g., "sprinkle nuts atop frosting").

Stir: Use a spoon to mix ingredients with a circular motion.

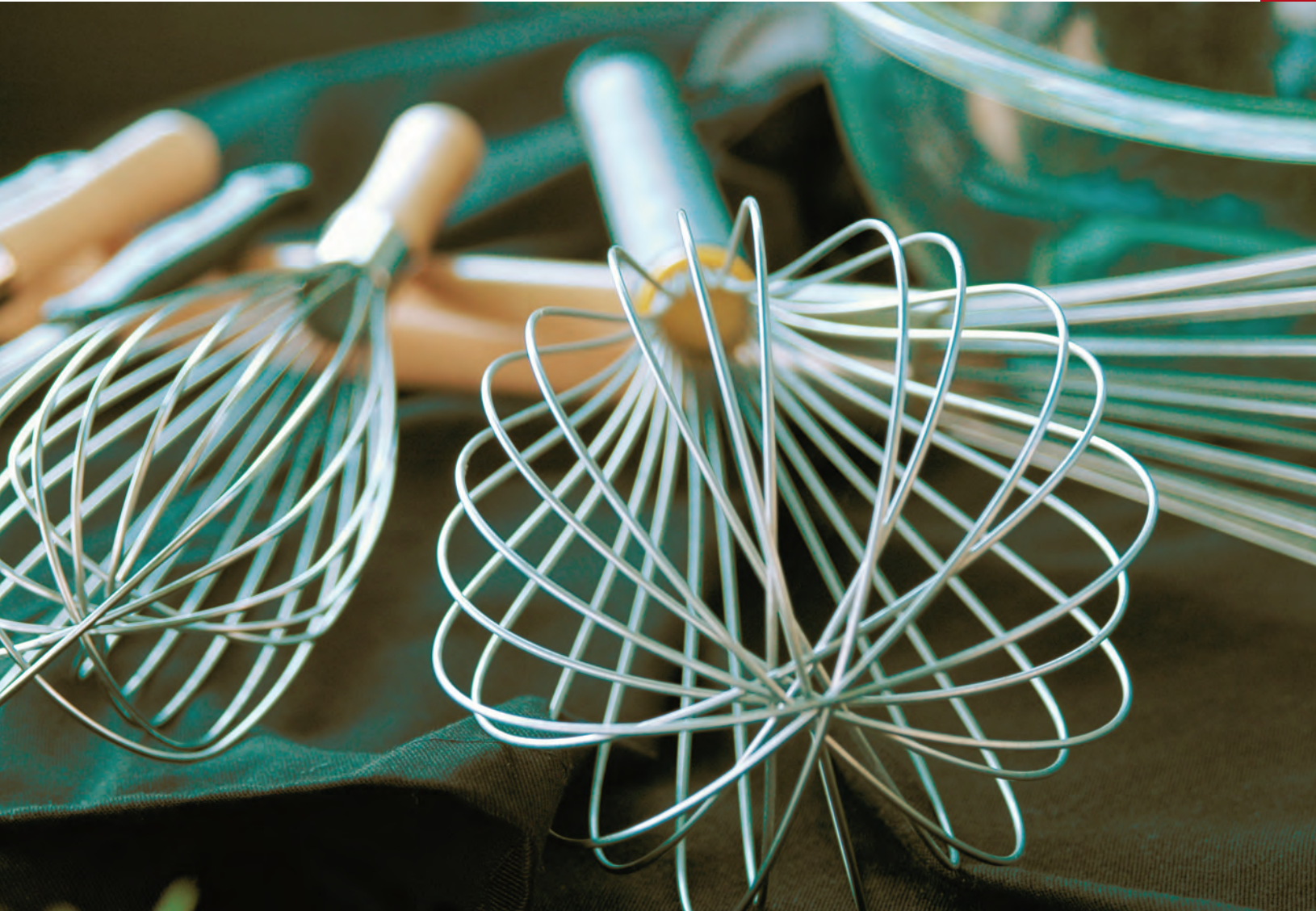
Superfine sugar: Also known as castor sugar, a more finely granulated sugar than traditional granulated cane sugar.

Vanilla powder: The whole dried vanilla bean ground until powdery. Vanilla powder's flavor doesn't evaporate as readily as vanilla extract, so it's especially suited for anything heated (baked goods, puddings, custards, and more).

Whip: Beat a mixture lightly with an electric mixer, wire whisk, or old-fashioned egg beater to incorporate air and increase volume.

Whisk: Traditionally, a utensil made of a group of looped wires held together by a long handle. When you whisk ingredients, you use this utensil to lighten the ingredients and incorporate air.

Zest: The thin, colorful outer skin of citrus fruit removed with a zester, vegetable peeler, paring knife, or, my favorite, a Microplane zester/grater. The aromatic, flavorful pieces are used to enhance baked goods. Most typically, zests used are from fresh oranges and lemons. The zest never includes the white pith underneath, which is bitter.



*Some basic baking knowledge, the right ingredients and tools—
like a whisk—and you have brownies!*

CHOCOLATE INFO

Pay attention—this is the stuff they ask you on quiz shows!

The cocoa tree is grown in hot, rainy climates in an area known as the “cocoa belt.” The most prolific of the cocoa-producing nations are Madagascar, Venezuela, Indonesia, Ecuador, Grenada, and a number of countries in the equatorial regions of Africa.

Four primary groupings of cocoa beans make up the world’s chocolate production:

Criollo accounts for 1 percent of the world’s cocoa production. It is the most sought after of all cocoa beans and is the most difficult to grow. Its low acid level and pleasing aroma produce a smooth, full-flavored chocolate.

Trinitario accounts for 5 percent of the world’s cocoa production. It is easily cultivated and noted for its fine aromatic flavor.

Nacional accounts for 2 percent of the world’s cocoa production. It is noted for its sweetness and aromatic flavor.

Forastero accounts for 92 percent of the world’s cocoa production. It is much easier to cultivate than the other beans, producing a higher yield at a lower cost. This bean has a more astringent taste.

If you paid attention to math in school, it’ll be very clear that premium cocoa beans account for only 8 percent of the world’s total cocoa production. Chocolates formulated from this small harvest are the pride of artisan producers.

Companies that produce this kind of chocolate use their own process for blending, roasting, and grinding—a process known as conching (combining the cocoa paste with cocoa butter at high temperatures while exposing the mixture to a blast of fresh air). Why? Chemical changes that take place during conching remove any musty or sour taste, develop the chocolate’s delicate flavor, and give it the “snap” characteristic of excellent chocolate. These producers also use cane sugar, pure vanilla, cocoa solids, and cocoa butter instead of the less expensive beet sugar, vanillin, and waxy stabilizers found in many mainstream chocolates.

Buy quality chocolates (see some of my choices in “Ingredient Preferences and Sources”). You’ll be rewarded with exceptional taste.

THE LANGUAGE OF CHOCOLATE

Cacao: The seed of a tropical evergreen tree used in making chocolate, cocoa, and cocoa butter.

Cocoa beans: The source of all cocoa and chocolate products, cocoa beans are found in the pods of the cocoa tree.

Chocolate liquor: This base of all chocolate and cocoa is produced by grinding the cocoa beans, resulting in a rich, dark-brown, liquid mass.

Cocoa butter: This is the natural fat of the cocoa bean, which is pressed from the chocolate liquor when making cocoa powder. Look for a high cocoa content when shopping—50 to 75 percent cocoa solids are usually a good sign.

Bittersweet, semisweet, and sweet chocolate: Each is prepared by blending chocolate liquor with varying amounts of sweeteners and cocoa butter. Sweet chocolate contains at least 15 percent chocolate liquor, while semisweet and bittersweet contain at least 35 percent.

Milk chocolate: America's favorite form, milk chocolate is made by adding cocoa butter, milk, sweeteners, and flavorings to chocolate liquor.

White chocolate: According to the FDA, this is really not a chocolate at all because it does not contain chocolate liquor. It is a blend of sugar, cocoa butter, dry milk solids, flavorings such as vanilla, and emulsifiers. Be sure the words "cocoa butter" are listed in the ingredients; otherwise you're simply buying candy coating made with flavorings and fats. Real white chocolate comes in shades of ivory, while other products normally called white "confections" are usually bright white.

Unsweetened chocolate: 99 percent cacao (unlike bittersweet, which contains some sugar). It contains about 50 percent cocoa butter. Unsweetened chocolate allows you to make desserts with a more intense chocolate flavor, controlling the degree of sweetness.

Cocoa powder: The soft brown powder obtained after most of the cocoa butter has been removed from chocolate liquor.

CUTTING CHOCOLATE

Mark the chocolate at the place you want to cut with the blade of a sharp, hard steel knife. Gently press down, rocking the knife back and forth until the piece splits off.

For easy melting, cut the chocolate into small pieces (e.g., referred to in my recipes as *coarsely chopped*) with a sharp knife as above, an ice pick, or a chocolate chopper. Cut on a heavy cutting board.

MELTING CHOCOLATE

Chocolate is best *melted slowly* and by *gentle heat*.

In the top of a double boiler over hot, not boiling, water (to avoid any rising steam), melt chocolate, stirring often and carefully monitoring heat, since chocolate scorches easily. The bowl and spoon or heatproof spatula should be absolutely dry. A drop of moisture will cause the chocolate to thicken.



Chocolate as an art form. Actually, it's simply the very best chocolate waiting to be melted in a double boiler.

Chocolate that is overheated may scorch, lose flavor, and turn coarse and grainy.

In many of my recipes I melt chocolate and butter in a saucepan directly over *low heat*, stirring often. As long as you're diligent about watching the mixture carefully and stirring often, this works well. Remember, too high a heat will scorch the mixture and—voilà!—good ingredients go to waste.

If you'd rather melt chocolate in a microwave oven, do so with caution, stirring frequently and melting on nothing more than medium power. Stir melting chocolate after it has just begun to liquefy.

Because of the sensitivity of milk solids to heat, milk and white chocolate should be stirred almost constantly. Dark chocolate need only be stirred frequently during melting.

Note: Cool melted chocolate to room temperature before adding to brownie batters. Adding hot melted chocolate will cause a textural change.

The best news of all is that chocolate contains “healthy” antioxidants. Research on antioxidants is still in its infancy, but cocoa powder and dark chocolate ranked highest in chocolate products. (So help a researcher and eat a piece of plain dark chocolate today.)