

Baking Better Banana Bread

Properly ripened bananas, a bit of yogurt, and the right mixing method create a flavorful bread with a smooth, hearty crumb.

BY ELIZABETH GUNAS CRAMPTON

As a child, I was always excited by the sight of overripe bananas on the kitchen counter. It meant we would bake banana bread—always moist, fragrant, and full of walnuts. Flash forward two-and-one-half decades, when I got out my favorite recipe books in an attempt to recreate that loaf. With my children and husband eagerly standing by, I unmolded flat loaves, heavy loaves, gritty loaves, and loaves that tasted only remotely of banana.

Then I called my mother for her recipe. When the bread came out of the oven, my family and I devoured every bite. The bread was soft and tender with plenty of banana and crunchy toasted walnuts. However, I saw three ways to improve the family “secret:” I wanted to add moisture, deepen the flavor, and lighten the texture.

Ripe Bananas and Yogurt

I found it very important to pay close attention to the condition of the bananas. Sweet, older, darkly speckled bananas infused both moisture and flavor, which meant that the bread, whether still warm or day-old, succeeded with two tablespoons less butter than the one-half cup in my mother’s recipe.

When shopping for bananas, if you don’t see darkly speckled fruit, ask any person stocking produce—bananas considered past their prime are often hidden under a cart, destined for the dumpster.

I also experimented with the way I prepared the banana for the batter: slightly mashed, mashed well, and pureed. Loaves with slightly mashed bananas left chunks of fruit. I preferred a smoother texture, but pureeing the bananas turned out to be a bad idea, because the batter did not rise as well. Leavener probably escaped before the thin batter developed enough structure to trap gases. Bananas well mashed by hand kept the batter thick.

I still wanted more moisture in the bread, so I tried mixing in milk, buttermilk, sour cream, and plain yogurt. Sour cream added richness, but it also imparted a heavy texture and an unattractive, pebbly crust. Milk added little flavor, and created a slick crust. Buttermilk added a delightful tang, but yogurt let the banana flavor stand out. And because yogurt has more solids than buttermilk, it made for a slightly more solid loaf, which I preferred.

While the added yogurt softened the bread’s

crumb, I still sought a more delicate, open grain. So I decided to experiment with various mixing methods to see how they affected the final texture.

Just Fold It

“Loaf-type” quick bread batters are usually mixed by either the muffin or the creaming methods. In the muffin method, dry ingredients are mixed in one bowl, liquids in another, then the two are gently stirred together. In the creaming method, butter and sugar are creamed together, then dry and wet ingredients are alternately mixed in.

The creaming method created a soft texture (reminiscent of butter cake) and good volume from the whipped sugar and butter. However, its lighter color looked less appetizing next to the golden-brown loaf achieved with the muffin method. The muffin method produced a delicate texture, too, and the less consistent crumb looked hearty and delicious. It also rose more than the creamed loaf. All in all, it was a better choice.

Take caution when mixing, though. When I stirred the wet and the dry ingredients to a smooth batter, the loaves turned out small and tough. Flour contains protein, and when protein mixes with water, gluten develops. The more you stir with a spoon, the more the gluten proteins arrange into long, orderly bundles. These bundles create an elastic batter that resists changing shape and cannot rise as well. To minimize gluten development, fold together the wet and dry ingredients gently, just until the dry ingredients are moistened. The batter should still be thick and chunky, without any streaks of unincorporated flour.

THE BEST BANANA BREAD

MAKES ONE 9-INCH LOAF

Greasing and flouring only the bottom of a regular loaf pan causes the bread to cling to the sides and rise higher. If using a nonstick loaf pan, on which the sides are very slick, grease and flour sides as well as the bottom.

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon baking soda
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- $1\frac{1}{4}$ cups toasted walnuts, chopped coarse (about 1 cup)

- 3 very ripe, soft, darkly speckled large bananas, mashed well (about $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup plain yogurt
- 2 large eggs, beaten lightly
- 6 tablespoons butter, melted and cooled
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1. Adjust oven rack to lower middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease bottom only of regular loaf pan, or grease and flour bottom and sides of nonstick 9-by-5-by-3-inch loaf pan; set aside. Combine first five ingredients together in large bowl; set aside.

2. Mix mashed bananas, yogurt, eggs, butter, and vanilla with wooden spoon in medium bowl. Lightly fold banana mixture into dry ingredients with rubber spatula until just combined and batter looks thick and chunky. Scrape batter into prepared loaf pan; bake until loaf is golden brown and toothpick inserted in center comes out clean, about 55 minutes. Cool in pan for 5 minutes, then transfer to wire rack. Serve warm or at room temperature.

BANANA-CHOCOLATE BREAD

Follow recipe for The Best Banana Bread, reducing sugar to 10 tablespoons and mixing $2\frac{1}{2}$ ounces grated bittersweet chocolate (a heaping $\frac{1}{2}$ cup) into dry ingredients.

BANANA-COCONUT BREAD WITH MACADAMIA NUTS

Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Toast $\frac{1}{2}$ cup flaked, sweetened coconut and 1 cup chopped macadamia nuts on small cookie sheet, stirring every 2 minutes, until golden brown, about 6 minutes. Follow recipe for the Best Banana Bread, substituting toasted macadamias and coconut for walnuts.

ORANGE-SPICE BANANA BREAD

Follow recipe for The Best Banana Bread, adding 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon, $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon grated nutmeg, and 2 tablespoons grated orange zest to dry ingredients.

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