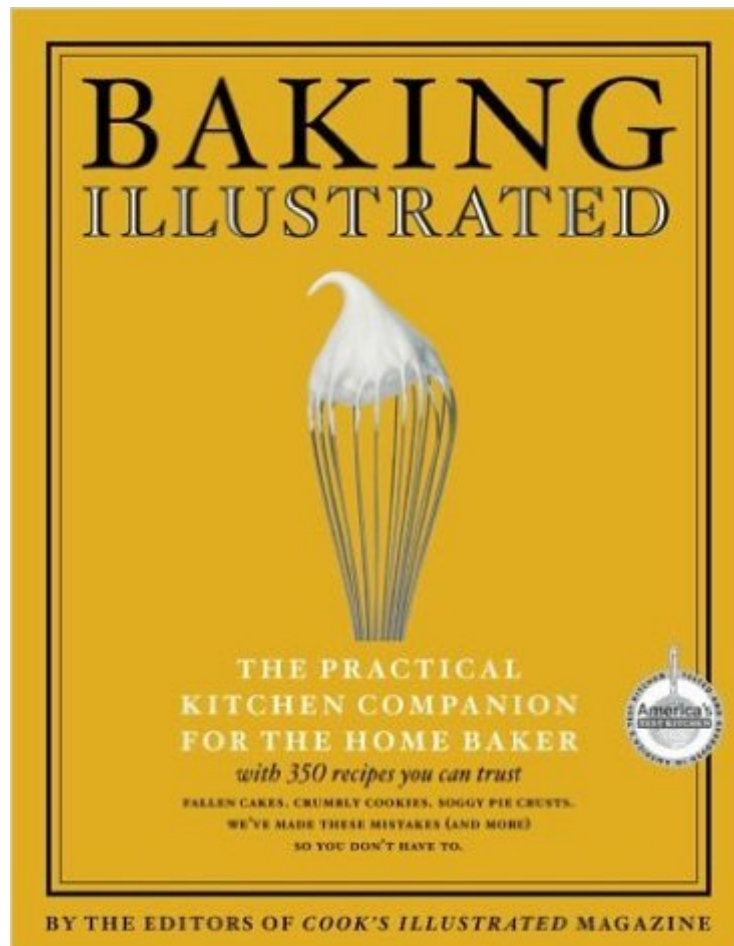


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# Baking Illustrated: A Best Recipe Classic



## Synopsis

The practical kitchen companion for the home baker with 350 recipes you can trust. Drawing from more than 10 years baking experience and exhaustive equipment and ingredient testing *Baking Illustrated* is packed with over 500 pages of sweet and savoury recipes including breads, pizza, cookies, cakes, pies and tarts. There are home classics, contemporary favourites and European baked goods.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This volume, *'Baking Illustrated'* is a compilation of articles and recipes from *'Cook's Illustrated'* magazine. This is the same source as many other volumes presuming to provide the 'best' recipe for various dishes. Overall, I find the recipes in this book very good, but with several reservations. I am really happy to see the 'America's Test Kitchen' crew turn their attention to baking. Unlike savory cooking, baking is highly dependent on accurate measurements of weight, volume, and temperature. Therefore, it is an area where a scientific approach of varying various quantities will have a more beneficial result than in the savory world. This book is subtitled *'The Practical Kitchen Companion for the Home Baker'*. This means the book is directed at the amateur home baker. This facet does not really distinguish the book that much from dozens of other baking books I have reviewed. In fact, I would warn occasional bakers who simply want recipes that this book might just be a bit too wordy for you. You may be much better served by a general baking book by Maida Heatter, Nick Malgieri, or even Martha Stewart. On the other hand, if you love *'Cooks Illustrated'* or

simply reading about cooking and baking technique, then this is a book for you! My biggest reservation with the whole 'best recipe' approach by 'Cooks Illustrated' is that a recipe is best only by a certain set of criteria. What may be the best FAST recipe may fall flat on its face for ENTERTAINING or for MOST HEALTHY. The 'Cooks Illustrated' team generally goes for a good compromise between fast and tasty. A corollary to this reservation is the presumption that the 'Cooks Illustrated' approach has a unique insight into baking truth. This is simply not true. I just finished reviewing professional baker Sherry Yard's new book 'The Secrets of Baking' and I believe it is unequivocally the best book you can get for understanding baking technique. She spends no time on discussing failed approaches. Everything in the book is right to the point. With only slightly less enthusiasm I would recommend the 'Bible' series of baking books by Rose Levy Beranbaum. One clue to my preference for Yard and Beranbaum is the way they treat brioche and challah. Both deal with these two recipes as two variations on a common 'master' recipe. Thus, when you understand how to make one, it is clear that you are very close to knowing how to do the other. This 'Baking Illustrated' volume gives the two recipes side by side, but gives little other clue that the recipes are related. Another symptom of where the 'Cooks Illustrated' method may be less than satisfactory is in their carrot cake recipe. Carrot cake is a really interesting product, made even more interesting to me by Sherry Yard's explanation of why it is so good and so versatile. I have been making a three layer carrot cake for birthdays from a Nick Malgieri recipe for over a year now, and I am very happy with the results. 'Baking Illustrated' gives a passle of advice on what works and what doesn't work and ends with a recipe for a single layer sheet cake. This simply does not have enough WOW quotient for an important birthday. Yet another weakness in the 'Cooks Illustrated' method is illustrated by a recent Jim Villas book which has over a hundred recipes for biscuits, with over twenty for simple, unflavored biscuits. Each of these twenty recipes has their own charms. The current volume has only one 'best recipe'. After all these reservations, I must still say that for the person who treats baking as a hobby, this book is a rich resource for all sorts of recipes. Some few baking books such as those by Yard and Beranbaum do a lot of explaining and offering alternatives, but most books do not. If you really want the straight scoop on what is the best ingredient to use, this is your book. It is also a rare source of excellent pictorials on technique based on line drawings that focus on the important aspects of a technique and do not distract as many photographs may do. The explanation of differences in types and results with butter you may not find anywhere else. The discussion of variations in flour is good, almost as good as the one you will find in Beranbaum's books. I give the book five stars but there may be many potential buyers who may not want the extensive why and what ifs and just want the recipes. For those people, I suggest Nick Malgieri's

'How to Bake'.

I loved the Cooks Illustrated "The New Best Recipe: All-New Edition with 1,000 Recipes" so much I asked for this for Christmas based on the glowing reviews here. Big mistake- this book is just the baking chapters from that book with 1 or 2 recipes added in each chapter and a couple of pages of color photos. Buy "The New Best Recipe" instead. It is the same price and you get 90% of the recipes in this book, plus 600+ other recipes!

I like the way Cook's presents recipes. They tell you how they experiment which give you, the home baker, the skills to experiment on your own! This is great. There are a lot of recipes here and they are all well-written. Please note, there is an error in their Basic Pie Crust recipe. It should be 1/2 cup of shortening rather than one cup. This was sent to me in an email from the America's Test Kitchen website.

On the whole, I like this collection of baking and pastry recipes. When I have never baked something before and need a failsafe recipe, this is the first book I pick up. It is a good source of reliable, if fussy, recipes. Although I have serious reservations about much in this book, I do recommend it, but not for the kitchen neophyte. It is disturbing how many best-selling baking and pastry books published in the last few years with a famous chef on the cover are chock full of recipes that simply do not work; Baking Illustrated is a happy exception. One myth about this book (produced by the same people who publish Cooks Illustrated magazine) should be dispelled from the beginning. It is not a collection of the best recipes of a particular baking or pastry item, nor is it an effort to take a classic, old fashioned recipe and do it correctly. Most of the recipes start out with a goal with a specific combination of texture, flavor, and appearance in mind (cf. brownies). The result very often is something that lacks the character you would normally expect from that dish. So, before you forge ahead with one of the recipes in this book assuming that it is the best of its type, read the introductory material carefully to see the end result the authors were shooting for (as prime examples of a failure in this vein, I cite the recipes for Corn Muffins and Sacher Torte). In particular, I object to the dampness of many of the chemically leavened baked goods. I also find the flavors generally to be bland. Not enough spice is fixed by adding more, but other problems like not enough richness or not sweet enough, is not easily fixed unless you are willing to re-engineer the recipe. This book has many shortcomings, but none of them fatal. The most vexing is side-bar mania: putting valuable information about ingredients, equipment or techniques in random places

scattered throughout the book. Much of this information is generally applicable to many recipes and other books. This information is disorganized, making this potentially valuable book useless as a reference. It also suffers overlap from another ATK publication: *The Dessert Bible*. Both books plough similar ground, although the actual recipe overlap is not that substantial; however, you do not need both to them. The main difference being that the *Baking Illustrated* has breads (both quick and yeast), and the book other does not. Given a choice, pick *Baking Illustrated*. Note carefully that the recipes are generally more involved with more steps than a typical baking and pastry book. The emphasis here is on correct result, not easy and simplified recipe procedures and steps that will save you time. Some of the recipes are risible: expecting you to blind-bake a pie crust and make the filling, and have both recipes finish at exactly the same time (maybe after doing the recipe a half dozen times you can accomplish this); expecting you to have room in your refrigerator overnight for a sheet pan of dough. You should also read the recipes carefully, as some take several days to finish. On the other hand, this book has many strengths. It is a team effort from a commercially viable test kitchen, meaning that it does not suffer from the prejudices or idiosyncrasies of one chef, famous or not. The authors are careful to point out which mixing method is best: standing mixer, food processor, or wooden spoon and strong arm. They are not wedded to one particular mixing method, nor do they blithely claim that all mixing methods will work with all recipes. They are also careful not to accept conventional wisdom or tradition for a recipe without thorough testing. This book has reliable versions of many recipes that are hard for the beginner to do correctly (cf. macaroons and meringue cookies). Many current baking and pastry books will quietly ignore those items that are staples but troublesome to do correctly (viz. pate a choux, angel food cake); this book merrily ploughs through each subject systematically, including those hard to do recipes. So, if you need a basic recipe, you will probably find it here done correctly. The most valuable aspect of this book is as a learning tool. If you are ready to move beyond the recipes in the newspaper or the back of the chocolate chip bag, this book is for you. I found the chapter on yeast breads to be particularly interesting: they discover dough folding, yeast preferments, cold proofing, and autolyse. Note that all recipes are preceded by a rather detailed and long-winded narrative of how they came to the final version of each recipe. These narratives are interesting and valuable learning tools you will not find anywhere else, even in culinary school. It has chapters on: quick breads, yeast breads, pizza, pies and tarts, pastry, fruit, cakes, and cookies.

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