



Make Ahead Homemade Yellow Cake Mix



When you're ready to bake, all you need is water, eggs, and a couple of minutes.

MAKING CAKE FROM a box mix is easy—that's the point. Beat the mix with eggs, oil, and water, and then bake. Unfortunately, these cakes taste cloying and chemical. Given the distilled monoglycerides, partially hydrogenated soybean oil, and propylene glycol monoesters of fatty acids they're made of, it's no wonder. I sought the goodness of a rich, buttery, homemade yellow cake with the ease of the box. My goal was a mix that would live in my cupboard and need

the fewest possible ingredient additions when I was ready to bake.

Most yellow cake recipes cream butter with sugar, beat in eggs one at a time, then add the dry ingredients alternately with milk or buttermilk. To make a yellow cake from a homemade "mix," I'd need a new method. I'd start, like the box, by mixing the dry ingredients upfront and adding the liquid ingredients at the back end. A rundown of the ingredients gave me pause: For starters,

Making cake from a box mix is fast and easy, but that's about all we can say for it. BY MARÍA DEL MAR SACASA

I intended to use butter and milk, which make for a tastier, more tender cake than oil and water. But how would I incorporate the butter if I couldn't cream it at the start? And if I had to add so many ingredients at the end—milk, eggs, vanilla, and possibly butter—why bother with a mix?

After some thought, I made two decisions: I'd try adding dry milk to the dry ingredients and stir in water later, and I'd melt the butter so I could stir it in with the water. I combined flour, sugar, dry milk, and baking powder and stored the mix in the pantry. When I was ready to bake, I stirred in the melted butter, eggs, vanilla, and water and transferred the cake to the oven. Thirty minutes later, I stared, puzzled, at a squat, dense, unappetizing cake.

Since I was no longer creaming the butter or beating in the eggs individually, my make-ahead cake didn't stand a chance of reaching its full height, our science editor explained. Those processes trap tiny air cells in the batter, which translate to lift in the oven. Use extra baking powder, he suggested. After a few tries, I managed to get close to the height of a standard yellow cake by going from 2 to 3 teaspoons (1 tablespoon) of baking powder. Up to now, I'd been using cake flour, because its tender crumb mimics that of a box-mix cake. For sturdier structure, I switched to half all-purpose flour, which has more gluten. This cake stood tall and proud.

I still wasn't happy with the number of ingredients I had to add at the end. While looking at other recipes for homemade cake mixes, I'd stumbled on one that cut shortening into the dry ingredients in a food processor, a technique usually reserved for biscuits or pie crusts. I did the same with the two sticks of butter I was using and stuck my mix in the freezer (butter will spoil in the pantry). Come baking time, I beat the mix with water, eggs, and vanilla. I had high hopes, but the cake tasted greasy. Once again, our science editor shed some light. Having the ingredients for cake batter at room temperature helps the fat and liquid emulsify, he explained. If the butter separates from the water, you'll get a greasy cake. For my next test, I used room-temperature eggs and warm water, and the problem disappeared.

Let Them Eat Cake

Our homemade mix makes a variety of cakes in addition to the two 9-inch layers in the master recipe. Pick your pan, set the oven to 350, and adjust your timer accordingly.



TWO 8 BY 8-INCH CAKE PANS
30 to 35 minutes



ONE 13 BY 9-INCH CAKE PAN
35 to 40 minutes



ONE 12-CUP BUNDT PAN
40 to 45 minutes



24 CUPCAKES
20 to 25 minutes

Could I cut a few more of the ingredients added at the end? Since I didn't want to substitute powdered eggs (yuck!) for fresh and use them at the start of the recipe, all that was left to tinker with was the vanilla. Scraping the seeds from a vanilla bean pod into the dry ingredients was effective, but I balked at the expense. To my surprise, dribbling vanilla extract into the dry mix worked, too. Or so I thought. But the resulting cake tasted as bland as mall food. I remembered—too late—that cold dulls flavors. To compensate for the mix coming straight from the freezer, I increased the extract from 2 teaspoons to 3, then whipped up a new mix. When the time came, it was just a minute's work to stir in eggs and water. Later that afternoon, I enjoyed a slice of "mix" cake with the taste of home.

MAKE-AHEAD YELLOW CAKE MIX

Makes enough mix for two 9-inch cake layers
You can make a second batch of mix without cleaning out your food processor, which will give you the makings for two cakes at the ready in your freezer.

- 2 cups granulated sugar
- 1½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1½ cups cake flour
- ½ cup nonfat dry milk powder
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 16 tablespoons unsalted butter (2 sticks), cut into ½-inch pieces and chilled
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract

Process sugar, flours, milk powder, baking powder, and salt in food processor for 15 seconds to combine. Add butter and vanilla and pulse until mixture resembles coarse meal. Freeze in zipper-lock bag for up to 2 months.

TO MAKE TWO 9-INCH LAYERS

1. PREPARE PANS Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour two 9-inch round cake pans (see box on previous page for an array of other cake pan options).

2. MAKE CAKE With electric mixer on medium speed, beat prepared cake mix, 1¼ cups warm water (about 110 degrees), and 2 large room-temperature eggs until mixture is smooth, about 2 minutes. Scrape batter into prepared cake pans and bake until toothpick inserted in center comes out clean, 30 to 35 minutes. Cool cakes in pans 10 minutes, then turn out onto wire rack. Cool completely, at least 1 hour.

LEMON CAKE

Prepare Make-Ahead Yellow Cake Mix, pulsing 2 tablespoons grated lemon zest with sugar before adding remaining ingredients to food processor.

BROWN SUGAR AND SPICE CAKE

Prepare Make-Ahead Yellow Cake Mix, substituting 1 cup dark brown sugar for same amount of granulated sugar and adding 1 tablespoon ground cinnamon, ½ teaspoon ground nutmeg, and ½ teaspoon ground cloves to food processor.

STEP BY STEP Homemade Mix Magic

Homemade cake mix? It sounds like an oxymoron. With some advance prep, though, a homemade cake is always near at hand.



1. Combine sugar, flours, milk powder, baking powder, and salt in the food processor.



2. Add chilled butter and vanilla and process to coarse crumbs.



3. Freeze mix in zipper-lock bag. To bake a cake or cupcakes, just add eggs and warm water.