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Measuring Savvy

Correct ingredient measurements are the key to a successful recipe. Improper ratios of certain ingredients such as salt, baking soda, baking powder, or hot and spicy ingredients can lead to poor taste and texture. A recipe allows you to apply basic food science techniques to specific ingredients.

Measuring Utensils

There are several different types of measuring utensils used for proper measuring of ingredients. The most common types of measuring equipment are listed below with a brief description for each. For accuracy, use the largest measuring tool possible. For example, use 1 tablespoon instead of 3 teaspoons; use 1 cup instead of four ¼ cups. Dry measuring utensils are designed for use with dry ingredients, while liquid measuring utensils provide greater precision for wet ingredients.

Measuring spoons usually consist of at least four spoons, which are made of plastic or metal. Measuring spoons are used to measure small quantities of both dry and liquid ingredients. It is helpful to have two sets so one can be used for dry and one for liquid ingredients.

A set of four measuring spoons will include ¼ teaspoon, ½ teaspoon, 1 teaspoon, and 1 tablespoon. Other sets may include additional measurements.

Dry measuring cups include plastic or metal cups of various sizes. Adjustable measuring cups are also available. They have a slide bar that can be adjusted so the cup can measure different amounts. Graduated and adjustable measuring cups are used to measure dry ingredients, such as flour, sugar, oats, rice, and solid ingredients such as shortening and peanut butter.

Single-measure cups are often nested in a graduated set.

Liquid measuring cups are made of glass or clear plastic. The pour spout prevents spilling and the handle gives you more control when pouring. The liquid should be measured on a flat surface. The liquid in the container will have a slightly curved appearance. Measure the desired amount at the bottom of the curve for greatest accuracy.

Liquid measuring cups are available in 1, 2, 4, and 8 cup sizes, and have graduated measures on the side.

The Art of Dry Measuring

To measure dry or solid ingredients, gently fill the cup or spoon until it is heaping over the top of the measuring utensil. Then level with a straight edge. Items such as oats, cornmeal, breadcrumbs, or cereal can be poured into the cup until it is overfilled and then leveled. Do not shake, tap, or pack the ingredient into the cup.

Brown sugar and shortening (and other solids) should be spooned into the measuring utensil and packed firmly to eliminate any air pockets. After the ingredient is firmly packed it can be leveled with a straight edge, such as the back of a knife. When removed, it should retain the shape of its container.

Butter and margarine in stick form have measurements marked on their wrappers, making it very convenient to measure the required amount. Cut off the amount you need. One stick equals 8 tablespoons, or ½ cup.

Miscellaneous Measuring

✶**Pinch** the ingredients between your forefinger and thumb. It is less than a dash.
✶**Dash**, used to measure liquid ingredients, is equal to about 3 drops. When used to measure dry ingredients, a dash should be over 1/16 teaspoon, but less than 1/8 teaspoon.
✶**Jigger** is a measurement equivalent to 3 tablespoons or 1½ fluid ounces.
✶**Scant** measurements are slightly less than the amount in the recipe.
✶**Heaping** is used when measuring dry ingredients; it indicates the ingredient should be mounded over the rim of the measuring utensil.

Measuring should not be done over the mixing bowl but over the sink, another bowl, or a sheet of wax paper to catch any excess spillage. Spillage caught on wax paper can be returned to that ingredient's container.

- If you do not have two sets of measuring cups or spoons, measure the dry ingredients first and then the liquid ingredients.
- Store loose dry ingredients, such as salt, sugar, and flour, in a labeled, sealed container. The ingredient can then be spooned out and leveled. You won't have to try to pour it into the measuring utensil.
- To help you keep track of which ingredients have been measured and added to the mixing bowl, place all the ingredients on one side of the mixing bowl.

Photographs: James Bastin

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