The Perfect Chocolate Chip Cookie

We set out to perfect the back-of-the-bag classic with a cookie that was crisp at the edges, chewy in the middle, and full of rich toffee flavor.

BY CHARLES KELSEY

Since Nestlé first began printing the recipe for Toll House cookies on the back of chocolate chip bags in 1939, generations of cooks have packed them into lunches, taken them to bake sales, and kept them on hand for snacking—arguably more so than any other kind of cookie. I've made countless batches myself over the years. The recipe is so easy: Cream butter and sugar (half white and half brown), add two eggs and vanilla, then mix in all-purpose flour, salt, baking soda, some chopped nuts, and the chips. Drop tablespoons of dough on a cookie sheet, bake at 350 for 10 minutes, and you're done.

The Toll House cookie's cakey texture and buttery flavor certainly have their appeal. But is it really the best that a chocolate chip cookie can be? In my opinion, a truly great cookie offers real complexity, not just a one-note sweet taste and uniform texture. My ideal has always been this: a chocolate chip cookie that's moist and chewy on the inside and crisp at the edges, with deep notes of toffee and butterscotch to balance its sweetness. What would it take to achieve the perfect specimen?



Our cookie's crackly exterior helps set it apart from Toll House.

Not-So-Cookie-Cutter Techniques

I'm not the first to think the Toll House cookie could stand improvement.

Not too long ago, *The New York Times* published a recipe inspired by famed New York City pastry chef Jacques Torres trumpeting an unusual tactic for creating more complex flavor in a chocolate chip cookie: resting the dough a full 24 hours before baking. The rest enables the flour to fully absorb moisture from the eggs, leading to drier dough that caramelizes more quickly in the oven and achieves richer flavor. Or at least that's the theory. When I tried the recipe, tasters found it did have a slightly deeper toffee taste than the Toll House cookie—but not nearly enough to warrant the inconvenience of a 24-hour rest.

Several Boston-area bakeries empl their own dough-resting techniques, so of them even more drastic: At Fl Bakery in the South End, chef Joan Chang swears by a rest of two or ev three days. Clear Flour Bread, near c offices in Brookline, portions the dou and freezes it before baking, a trick th helps prevent the dough from spreadi too much (and that keeps the center the cookie moist and chewy). Fine id for professional kitchens—but who home wants to wait two days to bake try jamming even one cookie sheet in the freezer?

Other chefs endorse "pet" ingredie to get better results. Following the lead pastry chef Christina Tosi at Manhatta Momofuku Bakery and Milk Bar, I add milk powder to the Toll House dou Tosi finds it brings depth to her bak goods; I found it just made the cook taste milky. I also experimented with slew of even less likely additives, incl ing tapioca powder, brown rice flour, a xanthan gum—all suggestions for ensuri chewier texture. In each case, tasters w unanimous: No, thanks.

I wasn't having luck on the flavor chewiness fronts, but an approach increasing crispness from the Toll House crea herself, Ruth Wakefield, seemed worth trying: a variation on her chocolate chip cookie rec published in *Toll House Tried and True Rec* (1940), Wakefield swaps all-purpose flour for c flour. But the swap yielded a cookie so crumbly t it practically disintegrated after one bite. I was exactly surprised. Cake flour has less protein (6 t percent) than all-purpose flour (10 to 12 percen Protein is one of the building blocks of glut which gives baked goods their structure. The l protein, the less structure, and the more crum the end product.

Examining the Elements

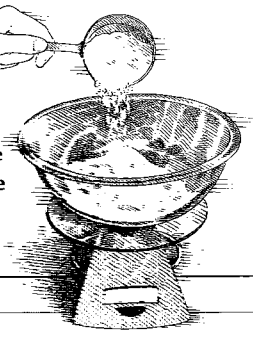
It was time to come up with my own ideas. Si small tweaks in a baking recipe can translate to differences, I would break down the Toll House r ipe into its main components and see what chan I could invoke by playing around with ingredie and proportions.

TECHNIQUE | MEASURE IT RIGHT

Even a tablespoon too much or too little flour can have an impact on cookies. Here's how to measure accurately.

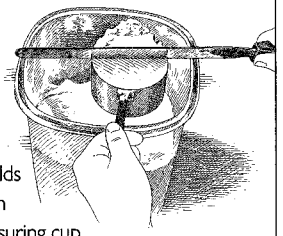
PREFERRED: WEIGH FLOUR

For the greatest accuracy, weigh flour before using it. Put a bowl on a scale, hit the "tare" button to set the scale to zero, and scoop the flour into the bowl.



SECOND-BEST: DIP AND SWEEP

Dip a dry measuring cup into the flour, sweeping away excess flour with a flat edge. This method yields more accurate results than spooning flour into a measuring cup.



reating a New Classic

s how we improved on the Toll House classic to create an even better cookie.

TOLL HOUSE RECIPE	OUR RECIPE
Equal Amounts Brown and White Sugar ratio of brown to white creates a cookie that's neither crisp nor chewy.	**More Brown Sugar** Using more brown sugar than white makes for a chewier cookie.
ed Solid Butter Creaming butter creates a cakier texture in cookies.	**Browned, Melted Butter** Melting butter contributes to chewiness; browning it enhances flavor.
Whole Eggs Whole eggs contribute to drier texture.	**1 Whole Egg, 1 Yolk** Eliminating one egg white also boosts chewiness.
Beat and Bake ing the dough immediately after ixing doesn't allow the sugar to dissolve as fully as possible.	**Whisk and Wait** Whisking sugar into the liquid ingredients and then waiting 10 minutes allows more of it to dissolve, setting up better flavor and texture.
Less Dough smaller the cookie, the more uniform its texture.	**More Dough** Three tablespoons of dough per cookie increases its crisp-chewy contrast.

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Next ingredient under the microscope: sugar. Besides adding sweetness, sugar affects texture. White sugar granules lend crispness, while brown sugar, which is hygroscopic (meaning it attracts and retains water, mainly from the air), enhances chewiness. All that moisture sounded like a good thing—too good, in fact. Cookies from the all-brown-sugar batch I baked were beyond chewy; they were so moist, they were nearly floppy. The Toll House recipe calls for an equal amount of white and brown sugar; I got the best results when I simply upped the brown sugar (tasters preferred dark for its deeper flavor) to 60 percent and knocked the granulated down to 40 percent.

Next came flour. I had already seen how cake flour, with its low protein content, yields a crunchy, crumbly cookie. What if I took the opposite tack and tried bread flour, with its higher protein content of 12 to 14 percent? Again, this was going too far: The cookies were so dense and chewy that they were breadlike. In the end, just cutting back on the all-purpose flour by ½ cup increased moistness in the cookies and allowed the chewiness contributed by the brown sugar to come to the fore. The only problem: With less flour, the cookies were a little greasy. To resolve the issue, I decreased the butter by 2 tablespoons.

Finally, I was ready to evaluate the role of eggs in my batter. I knew from experience that egg whites, which contain much of the protein in the egg, tend to create cakey texture in baked goods—not what I wanted in my cookies. What's more, as the cookies bake, any white that isn't fully absorbed in the batter readily dries out, which can leave a cookie crumbly. Eliminating one egg white was the right way to go, resulting in cookies that were supremely moist and chewy.

SCIENCE EXPERIMENT

For Perfect Cookies, Look to Sugar

Crunchy edges, chewy centers, and big butterscotch flavors—that chocolate chip cookie framework sounded pretty sweet to us. As it turns out, perfect cookies have a lot to do with sugar and how it's treated. Sugar that is dissolved in liquid before baking caramelizes more readily than sugar that simply melts when exposed to the same amount of heat. What would happen if we rested our cookie batter after we added the sugar to allow more of it to dissolve before going into the oven?

EXPERIMENT

We prepared two batches of our Perfect Chocolate Chip Cookies. Dough from the first batch went straight from the mixing bowl onto the baking sheet; the other batch rested for 10 minutes (with occasional whisking) after we combined the sugar with the recipe's liquids.

RESULTS

Cookies baked from the rested batter boasted not only richer, deeper flavor but also crisper edges.

EXPLANATION

Dissolving the sugar in liquid provided by the melted butter, vanilla, and egg (accelerated by whisking and resting) affects both flavor and texture. Dissolved sugar breaks down more quickly from crystalline sucrose into glucose and fructose, which caramelize at a lower temperature to form many rich, new flavor compounds. As the dissolved, caramelized sugar cools, it takes on a brittle structure. In our cookies, this brittle texture is more evident at the edges. Why? As the oven burns off moisture from the cookie perimeter, the remaining moisture gets pulled into the center, keeping it chewy. –C.K.

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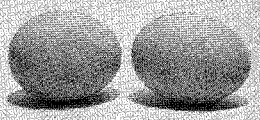
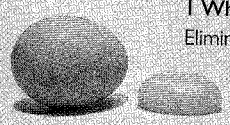
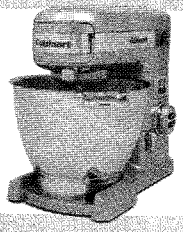
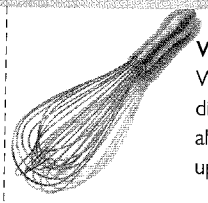
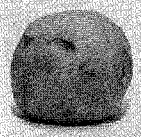
- Perfect Chocolate Chip Cookies

VIDEO TIP

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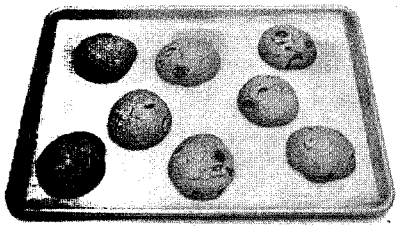
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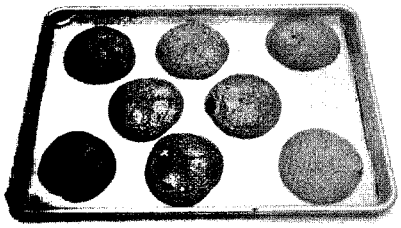
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RECIPE TESTING

Don't Bake in Batches



TOP RACK



BOTTOM RACK

Baking two trays at a time may be convenient, but it leads to uneven cooking. The cookies on the top tray are often browner around the edges than those on the bottom, even when rotated halfway through cooking.

Waiting for Better Flavor

I had achieved chewiness, but what about my other goals? The crisp edges and deep toffee flavor were still missing, and short of melting candy into the dough, I was stumped on how to create these effects. That's when batch number 43 came along.

In the middle of stirring together the butter, sugar, and eggs, I stopped to take a phone call. Ten minutes later, I found the sugars had dissolved and the mixture had turned thick and shiny, like frosting. I didn't think much of it until I pulled the finished cookies from the oven. Instead of the smooth, matte surface of the previous batches, these cookies emerged with a slightly glossy sheen and an alluring surface of cracks and crags. One bite revealed a rush of deep, toffeelike flavor. Mysteriously, these cookies finally had just the texture I was aiming for: crisp on the outside and chewy within. When I made the cookies bigger (3 tablespoons versus the rounded tablespoon called for in the Toll House recipe), the effect was even greater.

Could it wasn't just luck, so I pulled our science editor into the case. His theory was that by allowing sugar to dissolve in the liquids, more of it dissolved and formed a layer of moisture before baking. The sugar caramelizes more easily, creating a richer flavor and influencing texture. When liquid in water is heated, the moisture molecules break apart, creating a leavening action that translates to crisper cookies. Cracks mainly at the cookie's surface, as moisture escapes, while the remaining moisture in the center (see "For Perfect Cookies Look to Sugar" on page 23).

One final clue was left unanswered: the baking time and temperature. With caramelization in mind, I kept the temperature hot, 375 degrees—the same as for Toll House cookies. Watching carefully, I left the cookies in the oven until they were golden brown, just set at the edges, and soft in the center, between 10 and 14 minutes.

I sat down with a tall glass of milk and a sample from my weeks of labor and more than 700 cookies baked. My cookie was crisp and chewy, gooey with chocolate, with a complex medley of sweet, buttery, caramel, and toffee flavors. Perfection is a subjective judgment at best, so I held one more blind tasting, pitting my cookie against the Toll House classic. The verdict? My cookies weren't just better—they were perfect.

PERFECT CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES

MAKES 16 COOKIES

Note: Avoid using a nonstick skillet to brown the butter; the dark color of the nonstick coating makes it difficult to gauge when the butter is browned. Use fresh, moist brown sugar instead of hardened brown sugar, which will make the cookies dry. This recipe works with light brown sugar, but the cookies will be less full-flavored. For our winning brand of chocolate chips, see page 29.

- 1¾ cups (8¾ ounces) unbleached all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- 14 tablespoons (1¾ sticks) unsalted butter
- ½ cup (3½ ounces) granulated sugar
- ¾ cup (5¼ ounces) packed dark brown sugar (see note)
- 1 teaspoon table salt
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 1 large egg
- 1 large egg yolk
- 1¼ cups semisweet chocolate chips or chunks (see note)
- ¾ cup chopped pecans or walnuts, toasted (optional)

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Line 2 large (18- by 12-inch) baking sheets with parchment paper. Whisk flour and baking soda together in medium bowl; set aside.

2. Heat 10 tablespoons butter in 10-inch skillet over medium-high heat until melted, about 2 minutes. Continue cooking, swirling pan constantly until butter is dark golden brown and has nutty aroma, 1 to 3 minutes. Remove skillet from heat and, using heatproof spatula, transfer browned butter to large heatproof bowl. Stir remaining 4 tablespoons butter into hot butter until completely melted.

3. Add both sugars, salt, and vanilla to bowl with butter and whisk until fully incorporated. Add egg and yolk and whisk until mixture is smooth with no sugar lumps remaining, about 30 seconds. Let mixture stand 3 minutes, then whisk for 30 seconds. Repeat process of resting and whisking 2 more times until mixture is thick, smooth, and shiny. Using rubber spatula or wooden spoon, stir in flour mixture until just combined, about 1 minute. Stir in chocolate chips and nuts (if using), giving dough final stir to ensure no flour pockets remain.

4. Divide dough into 16 portions, each about 3 tablespoons (or use #24 cookie scoop). Arrange 2 inches apart on prepared baking sheets, 8 dough balls per sheet. (Smaller baking sheets can be used, but will require 3 batches.)

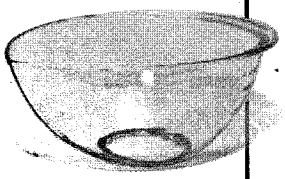
5. Bake cookies 1 tray at a time until cookies are golden brown and still puffy, and edges have begun to set but centers are still soft, 10 to 14 minutes, rotating baking sheet halfway through baking. Transfer baking sheet to wire rack; cool cookies completely before serving.

EQUIPMENT TESTING

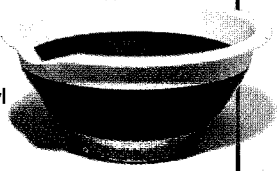
Innovative Mixing Bowls

Made of classic stainless steel or heat-resistant glass, our mixing bowls are kitchen workhorses, indispensable for everything from mixing cookie dough to making pancake batter to jury-rigging a double boiler to melt chocolate. Yet they have their shortcomings: They wobble as you mix, the rim can make pouring a mess, and metal bowls can't go in the microwave. Would innovative new designs do better? We tested nine models in glass, plastic, metal, and silicone, with features such as silicone- or rubber-lined bottoms to prevent skidding and handles and spouts to make pouring easier. Only one was a true improvement over the old classics. For complete testing results, go to www.cooksillustrated.com/jun09.

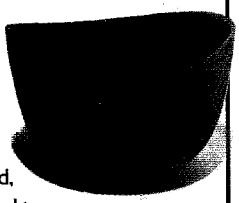
–Peggy Chung Collier



MIXING MASTER
PYREX Grip-Rite 5-Quart Teardrop Mixing Bowl
Price: $16.99
Comments: Silicone strips around the base grip the counter firmly, and the teardrop shape, spout, and handle allow for neat pouring, making this bowl a real winner.



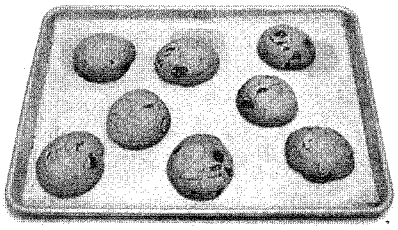
SPACE SAVER
PROGRESSIVE 5-Quart Collapsible Bowl
Price: $11.30
Comments: This second-place bowl, made of plastic and silicone, collapses to a space-saving 2-inch height. It's wide and sturdy—but not microwave-safe.



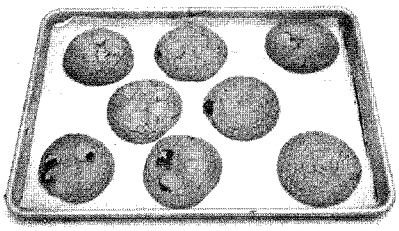
TOO WOBBLY
iSi BASICS Flex It 2-Quart Mixing Bowl
Price: $18
Comments: You can squeeze this seventh-ranked, microwave-safe silicone bowl to form a spout, but it seemed flimsy and wobbled during mixing.

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1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Line 2 large (18- by 12-inch) baking sheets with parchment paper. Whisk flour and baking soda together in medium bowl; set aside.

2. Heat 10 tablespoons butter in 10-inch skillet over medium-high heat until melted, about 2 minutes. Continue cooking, swirling pan constantly until butter is dark golden brown and has nutty aroma, 1 to 3 minutes. Remove skillet from heat and, using heatproof spatula, transfer browned butter to large heatproof bowl. Stir remaining 4 tablespoons butter into hot butter until completely melted.

3. Add both sugars, salt, and vanilla to bowl with butter and whisk until fully incorporated. Add egg and yolk and whisk until mixture is smooth with no sugar lumps remaining, about 30 seconds. Let mixture stand 3 minutes, then whisk for 30 seconds. Repeat process of resting and whisking 2 more times until mixture is thick, smooth, and shiny. Using rubber spatula or wooden spoon, stir in flour mixture until just combined, about 1 minute. Stir in ch late chips and nuts (if using), giving dough fina to ensure no flour pockets remain.

4. Divide dough into 16 portions, each al 3 tablespoons (or use #24 cookie scoop). Arr 2 inches apart on prepared baking sheets, 8 dc balls per sheet. (Smaller baking sheets can be u but will require 3 batches.)

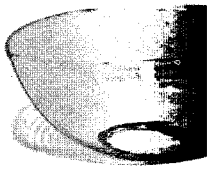
5. Bake cookies 1 tray at a time until cookie golden brown and still puffy, and edges have be to set but centers are still soft, 10 to 14 min rotating baking sheet halfway through bal Transfer baking sheet to wire rack; cool co completely before serving.

EQUIPMENT TESTING

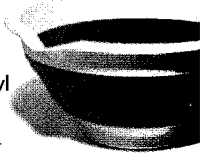
Innovative Mixing Bowls

Made of classic stainless steel or heat-resistant glas our mixing bowls are kitchen workhorses, indispens able for everything from mixing cookie dough t making pancake batter to jury-rigging a double boile to melt chocolate. Yet they have their shortcoming They wobble as you mix, the rim can make pourin a mess, and metal bowls can't go in the microwave Would innovative new designs do better? We teste nine models in glass, plastic, metal, and silicone, wit features such as silicone- or rubber-lined bottom to prevent skidding and handles and spouts to mak pouring easier. Only one was a true improvemen over the old classics. For complete testing result go to www.cooksillustrated.com/jun09.

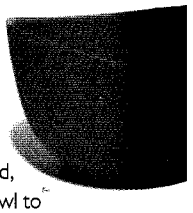
–Peggy Chung Collie



MIXING MASTER
PYREX Grip-Rite 5-Quart Teardrop Mixing Bowl
Price: $16.99
Comments: Silicone strips around the base grip the counter firmly, and the teardrop shape, spout, and handle allow for neat pouring, making this bowl a real winner.



SPACE SAVER
PROGRESSIVE 5-Quart Collapsible Bowl
Price: $11.30
Comments: This second-place bowl, made of plastic and silicone, collapses to a space-saving 2-inch height. It's wide and sturdy—but not microwave-safe.



TOO WOBBLY
iSi BASICS Flex It 2-Quart Mixing Bowl
Price: $18
Comments: You can squeeze this seventh-ranked, microwave-safe silicone bowl to form a spout, but it seemed flimsy and wobbled during mixing.