

Reader's question:

What to use— butter, margarine, vegetable shortening ...

I love questions from readers— today's article is the result of a reader who wrote in saying that they really enjoyed the article on baking soda/powder, could we please write a story on butter/shortening/lard and how it relates to cooking.

So, here we go. Butter, margarine, shortening, Lard, copher, suet— will the real winner please stand up?

First of all, I am looking into these products as they relate to cooking and baking. If you want to compare which is better to top your toasted bagel— that you will have to determine on your own.

Butter: a dairy product made by churning fresh or fermented milk or cream. Butter consists of butterfat surrounding tiny miniscules of water and milk proteins. Butter is most commonly made from cow's milk, but can be made from other animals as well. When refrigerated, butter is a solid, moving to spreadable consistency at about 15 degrees C and then to a thin liquid when heated. Butter is about 80% fat— all saturated fat.

Butter has a low smoke point—although it can be stretched a little higher when clarified butter (butter with the water and milk solids removed) is used. Butter adds essential flavour to sauces and is used in many forms of cooking. As it pertains to baking, many recipes call for butter and sugar to be creamed together at the start of the recipe— adding to the leavening power of the recipe. Some cookies, such as shortbread may have no other form of moisture other than the water in the butter.

For making pastry, butter adds great flavour, but can be difficult because of its low smoke point— keeping all the ingredients for the pastry chilled and chilling the pastry before it goes in the oven can help. For long-baking

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pastry covered dishes, a butter crust can contribute to over-browning and the crust may need to be covered for some portion of the baking.

Margarine: Margarine today can be made from a variety of different animal and vegetable fats and then often mixed with skimmed milk, salt and emulsifiers. Margarine are generally a combination of saturated and mono and poly unsaturated fats. There are many different fat contents of margarine. For the purposes of baking, you need to choose a margarine with a fat content of 60% or more. Although a 60% fat content margarine can be substituted for butter in many cooking and baking recipes, it is not recommended in recipes that are extremely precise in the fat and moisture contents such as pie pastry.

Vegetable shortening: a semi-solid fat (100% fat) used in cooking and baking. It is made with partially hydrogenated oil, meaning it is traditionally high in trans fats. However, Crisco has been changing all of their formulations over the past number of years and now claims that their regular vegetable shortening in a 12g serving has only 1 gram trans fats. Vegetable shortening has a higher smoke point than butter and therefore holds up well to the making of pastry.

Lard: is pig fat, rendered or unrendered

(meaning that there are two different ways of producing the lard— a wet or a dry method). Lard has saturated fat and unsaturated fat, with some trans fats due to the hydrogenation process. It has a high smoke point and large fat crystals, which help make the flakes so desired in pie pastry. Lard makes an excellent pastry crust.

Suet: suet is raw beef or mutton fat— hard fat found around the loin and kidneys. It is primarily found in dehydrated form now, mixed with flour to make it stable at room temperature. It is an essential ingredient in the making of Christmas pudding, haggis, mincemeat and the crust for steak and kidney pie. The low melting point of suet makes it perfect for cooking at moderate temperatures— such as steaming. As a pastry, it is quite soft and does not yield the crispness often yearned for in a pie pastry.

Copher: a vegetable shortening made from hydrogenated coconut oil. Produced only in Australia— it is difficult to find in Europe and North America. It is used in traditional Australian treats such as Chocolate crackles and White Christmas.

The bottom line? When cooking and baking, I primarily use butter. I will never substitute for margarine in my own cooking. Crisco vegetable shortening is the only product I use for pie pastry. It makes a great pastry with perfect flakes and just the right amount of browning— it's easy to handle, the pies turn out delicious— and its what my mom taught me to use. I use suet for Christmas puddings and mincemeat and will continue to do so. You'll have to make your own choice!

Have fun and keep cooking!

(Lori and Gerry can be reached at whatscookin@independentfreepress.com)



Cheery Cherry Muffins

Makes 12 large muffins
Ingredients

- 2 cups cake and pastry flour
- 1/4 tsp salt
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 2 tsp baking powder
- 2 eggs
- 4 tbsp melted butter
- 3/4 cup milk
- 1 cup halved sour cherries (either canned or frozen— if frozen, then thawed and well drained)

Method

Sift together flour, salt, sugar and baking powder.

In a separate bowl, beat eggs. Add melted butter and milk. Mix well.

Add the wet ingredients to the dry. Add the cherries. Fold the batter together extremely gently. Be very careful to mix for a minimum of time.

Pour into paper-lined muffins tins or tins well sprayed with non-stick spray. Bake at 350 degrees for 25-30 minutes or until tops are rounded, golden brown and a tester inserted in the muffin comes out clean.

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