

Hail the 'king' of the brownies

Arthi Subramaniam
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

There are brownies, and then there is the king of brownies.

I'm talking about ones with bananas and peanut butter that would get Elvis Presley's blessings.

The signature trademark of a good classic brownie is that it should be chewy, gooey and not overbaked. It does not have to be fancy and topped with swirls or glazes. Nor does it need to feature hard-to-find ingredients. A recipe free of fuss will be just fine.

If it has a nice sheen, that's great. If it is a crackly top, that is great, too. And if it strikes the right balance between chewy, cakey and fudgy and has a deep chocolate flavor, that's the best.

I like a fudgy brownie but not one that is so ridiculously rich that I can't even get halfway through it. Or I have to wash it down with cold milk or water. At the same time, I am not crazy about thick cakey brownies where the flour dominates.

A brownie also needs to be one that is intensely chocolaty but not bitter. One that is sweet but won't hurt my teeth. And one that can remain moist even after a couple of days.

It's easy to overbake brownies as it is often hard to tell when they are done. The usual visual cues that indicate something is browned enough on top don't work here because the brownies are already, well, brown. Determining the doneness through the aroma can be tricky, too.

The best way to check for doneness is to insert a toothpick or a cake tester in the center of the brownies. If the tester comes out with a few moist crumbs sticking to it, the brownies are baked perfectly.



Pam Panchak/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-TNS

Bananas and peanut butter make the "King of Brownies" super tasty without making them greasy.

On the other hand, if it comes out clean, they have been overbaked.

The sky's the limit when it comes to the add-ins. Nuts, chocolate chunks, dried fruits, mint chips, coconut flakes and cream cheese work well when mixed into the batter, and so do pretzels, graham crackers and marshmallows.

Salt accentuates the sweetness, so be sure to add a dash of it in the batter. For a hint of spice, a little bit of ancho chili powder or cayenne pepper can do wonders.

There are add-ins I avoid at all costs, and curry powder, potato chips and bacon are among them. They are just not my type of flavoring for brownies. Also, when things like matcha are added, I think it is just

plain wrong to call it a brownie anymore.

In "Flavor for All: Everyday Recipes and Creative Pairings" by James Briscione and Brooke Parkhurst, a recipe that is boldly titled "The King" of Brownies caught my eye. Like the famed Elvis sandwich, the brownies call for bananas and peanut butter that act as both moistening and flavoring agents.

Chocolate chips are melted with butter and brown sugar and blended with bananas, flour and cocoa powder. After the batter is poured into a prepared pan, spoonfuls of peanut butter are dropped on top and then dragged with a butter knife to create swirls.

After about 25 minutes in a 350-degree oven, the brownies turn

not chewy, but super soft. And they are rich but not greasy. Although the banana and peanut butter flavors are unmistakable they don't smack you in your face.

They are the kind of brownies you can go bananas or nuts over. And who knows? The king of rock 'n' roll might have, too, if he knew about it.

'THE KING' OF BROWNIES

The bananas and peanut butter are moistening and flavoring agents here, making the brownies super soft. Then there is the mesmerizing aroma. While the banana-y presence is unmistakable, it does not smack in your face.

2 ripe bananas
1 large egg
1 cup packed light brown sugar, divided
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter
2 cups semisweet chocolate chips
¾ cup all-purpose flour
¼ cup unsweetened cocoa powder
½ cup creamy peanut butter

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease a 9-by-9-inch baking pan.

Combine the banana, egg, ½ cup of brown sugar and vanilla extract in a bowl with an electric mixer until smooth.

Combine the remaining ½ cup brown sugar and butter in a small saucepan. Cook over medium heat, stirring often, until the sugar has melted.

Remove from the heat. Add chocolate chips and stir until smooth.

Beat the butter-chocolate mixture into the banana mixture. Add the flour and cocoa and stir to combine.

Transfer the batter to the prepared pan. Drop spoonfuls of peanut butter over the top of the batter and then drag a butter knife through it to create swirls.

Bake for about 25 minutes, until the edges are set and a toothpick inserted into the center comes out slightly moist.

Let cool completely in the pan on a wire rack before cutting into squares. Store in an airtight container or tightly wrapped in the refrigerator for up to 10 days.

Makes 16 brownies.

— Adapted from "Flavor for All: Everyday Recipes and Creative Pairings" by James Briscione and Brooke Parkhurst (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; October 2020)

Not fresh, but still a fine flavor

■ Sun-dried tomatoes are the next best option to off-the-vine

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In these off-season months when you cannot find sun-drenched tomatoes, go with the next best thing — sun-dried tomatoes.

Dehydrated tomatoes, whether they are dry-packed or preserved in olive oil, are sweet, tangy and add a burst of flavor in salads, pasta, quick dips and pesto. They make a colorful topping on pizzas, focaccia or crostini and are ideal for an antipasto.

A creamy Parmesan polenta, for instance, is elevated when topped with oil-packed sun-dried tomatoes cooked with garlic, broccoli rabe and broth. Or how about tossing roasted green beans with sun-dried tomatoes that have been whisked with Kalamata olives, lemon juice, fresh oregano and goat cheese.

Fusilli salad sings with an antipasto tone when the cooked corkscrew-shaped pasta is combined with sun-dried tomatoes, salami, provolone cheese, artichoke hearts and peppadew peppers. Garlicky chicken meatballs studded with chopped sun-dried tomatoes and jalapeno is a delight for the senses for a weeknight dinner.

The shriveled fruits are minimalists because they only have four requirements — good plum tomatoes, a

little salt, plenty of sun and plenty more patience.

You can thank the sun for their concentrated tomato flavor. When tomatoes dry under the summer sun, their water content is drawn out, leaving them richer in taste and deeper in hue. And they retain their antioxidants and vitamins.

Lisa Mantella, 65, who was born and raised in the Calabria region of southern Italy, remembers helping her mother to dry tomatoes during the months of July and August when the sun was at its strongest.

Her mother would monitor the weather forecast in the local newspaper and on the radio. If it was predicted to be sunny and dry for at least three or four days, it was time to pull out a table to the balcony and dry the tomatoes.

"It had to be nice, hot and dry. There could not be any humidity in the air," emphasized the O'Hara resident who is a part-time pastry chef at the Pittsburgh Field Club in Fox Chapel.

Only the elongated and sweet San Marzano tomatoes with pointed ends would do. The tomatoes were cut lengthwise in half and sprinkled with a little salt to draw out the moisture. Then they were laid out on a kitchen towel over a tray in a single layer with the cut

side facing the sun.

Round, juicy tomatoes were avoided because they took longer to dry.

The tomatoes were left out all day long, anywhere from three, four days or more, depending on the sun. Dried tomatoes can lose up to 93% of their original weight. Ms. Mantella determined they were ready by their appearance — the tomatoes needed to have shrunk to three-fourths of their original size.

She was only 5 or 6 years old when she first began helping her mother. Her job was to lay out the halved tomatoes on the tray after her mother had cut them and to move the tray around so they received full sun all day long.

The plum tomatoes were from her family's 40-acre farm, where they also grew eggplant, green beans and broccoli.

"Even though I'm Italian, I have never liked raw tomatoes. My mother never liked them either," she said, laughing. "I like them only when they are cooked."

Dried tomatoes eaten alone are chewy to the point of being sometimes leathery and usually last three or four months. When hydrated in olive oil, they can last six months. The oil imparts flavor to the dried tomatoes and helps them stay fresh. Ms. Mantella cautions that the tomatoes need to be completely



Andrew Rush/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-TNS

Spaghetti served with piquant sun-dried tomatoes and pistachio pesto.

covered with olive oil and stored in tightly sealed jars.

Dry-packed and oil-packed tomatoes are interchangeable in recipes. To make dry-packed tomatoes less chewy, hydrate them in water or stock first. Oil-packed tomatoes can be used as is, but sometimes the excess oil needs to be patted off.

Ms. Mantella continued sun-drying tomatoes after getting married and moving to Pittsburgh. Sometimes she uses her oven to do the job.

"Pittsburgh summers can be humid and not consistent," she said.

She grows San Marzano tomatoes in garden pots and lays out the halves in a single layer on a parchment paper-lined baking sheet. She then places them in a 170-degree oven for about 12 hours, checking on them occasionally.

Just like her sun-dried tomatoes, the shrunken, oven-dried ones boast an intense flavor.

"To tell the truth, they are almost the same," she said.

SPAGHETTI WITH SUN-DRIED TOMATO AND PISTACHIO PESTO

Garlicky, nutty, sweet and tangy, this sun-dried tomato pesto has everything going for it. Use leftover pesto as a spread on toast or with roasted chicken.

For the pesto
3 ounces sun-dried tomatoes
1/4 cup shelled salted pistachios, plus 2 tablespoons chopped nuts for garnish, divided
1/4 cup plus 1 tablespoon olive oil, divided
2 large cloves garlic, crushed
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
1/4 teaspoon crushed red peppers

For the pasta
7 ounces dried spaghetti
Olive oil
Coarsely ground pepper

For the pesto, bring a small pot of water to a boil and

cook the sun-dried tomatoes for 3 to 4 minutes or until soft. Remove the tomatoes with a slotted spoon and transfer to a plate. Reserve the cooking water.

Drain the tomatoes. Transfer to a blender. Add 4 tablespoons of the cooking water, 1/4 cup of pistachios, 1/4 cup of olive oil, garlic, salt and crushed peppers. Puree until smooth.

Taste and add more salt if needed. If the pesto is too dry, add a little more of the cooking water.

For the pasta, bring a large pot of salted water to a boil and cook the spaghetti according to the package directions until al dente.

Drain the spaghetti, divide among the plates and drizzle with remaining olive oil. Sprinkle with the pesto, chopped pistachios and a little pepper. Serve warm.

Serves 2.

— Adapted from "365: A Year of Everyday Cooking and Baking" by Meike Peters (Prestel; October 2019)



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