

Reminding ourselves to bake for the fun of it

By DANIEL NEMAN

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

It was such an ordinary phrase, and tossed off so casually, that I almost did not notice it. And even then, it took a second to register.

This was a few months ago, and I was watching one of the last episodes of “The Great British Baking Show.” Perhaps the most ebullient of the remaining four contestants, Crystelle Pereira, says she wants to concentrate on the baking and “just enjoy it.”

Just enjoy it.

First of all, have you ever heard any competitor on any American cooking show ever talk about enjoying it?

American contestants aren't there to enjoy it, they are there to win. The thought of enjoyment never crosses their minds. They are far too concerned with the correct temperature to roast their Brussels sprouts or wondering whether anchovies taste good with fire-roasted tomatoes.

I'm sure Pereira wanted to win, too, or at least do as well as she possibly

could. But in an unguarded moment, she revealed her true motivation. She just wanted to have fun.

For Pereira, and for many of us, baking is fun.

As I write this, I have a loaf of bread in the oven. I don't have to have a loaf of bread in the oven. I could buy an excellent loaf at any neighborhood grocery store, and I could get an even better than excellent loaf at a nearby bakery.

It isn't the money, though that bakery bread gets awfully pricey. I bake bread for the fun.

I bake cakes for the fun.

I bake pies, or at least pie crusts, for the fun. I bake cookies because I like cookies.

This is new to me. I have always thought of myself as a cook, not a baker. Baking relies on precise measurement, and I am a master of imprecision. That is why I am a cook; I can throw a handful of one ingredient into a pan of another ingredient and wind up with something delicious.

It's enjoyable. But maybe it isn't straight-up, sheer, unadulterated fun, like baking.

Is it the butter? Is it the

sugar? Is it the flour?

Maybe it is the fact that I can use my hands to play with my food. There is something deeply satisfying, on a primal level, in the texture of a smooth, soft, pliant dough. There is something magical about seeing a yeast dough rise.

Perhaps it is the way a small handful of basic ingredients can be combined to yield such different results. The same building blocks are used to make bagels and doughnuts, biscuits and brownies, muffins and sweet rolls and scones. Immediate gratifica-

tion plays a part, too. Once you've mixed together the ingredients, which rarely takes long, you can pop them in the oven to bake. As soon as they are cooled, you can eat them.

The same is true of cooking, of course. But what comes out of the oven is different.

With cooking, you may end up with fried chicken, or stir-fried pork, or a vegetable terrine.

But with baking, you get bread or dessert. And everyone knows those are the best parts of any meal. Just enjoy it.

Tinkering with TikTok recipes

By DANIEL NEMAN

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

The worst pain of my life was when I was afflicted with kidney stones. If I ever have another, and I am doubled over in unbearable agony, at least I will know that it could be worse.

I could be watching TikTok.

I had spent my entire life without once going on TikTok. I had never even been tempted. Though I did not realize it at the time, I was living in a state of grace.

Then my editor decided it might make a good story if I cooked some of the more popular TikTok recipes.

My editor hates me. TikTok, if you are blissfully unaware, is an app on which people from around the world post incredibly stupid videos. There is some sort of a time limit and they are meant to be short, but many of them seem positively interminable.

To familiarize myself with the concept, I watched as many as I could stand, back to back. Several featured the same boy with clear blue eyes who does weird things to his hair. Others showed people lip-syncing to songs or rhythmically contorting themselves in what is meant to be a dance. Most of the rest appear to be videos of cats and dogs, often with humans speaking for them in squeaky voices.

But it is not just a site for narcissists to draw attention to themselves and their pets. It is also a place for narcissists to show the recipes they have cooked.

One of the biggest TikTok recipes is something called Mermaid Toast. Invented in 2017 (but everything on TikTok is new to me), Mermaid Toast is toast with cream cheese that has been tinted with swirls of color made with such ingredients as liquid chlorophyll and algae powder, and decorated with edible gold leaf and edible glitter.

When all is said and done, it's still just toast with cream cheese.

I did not make Mermaid Toast, but I did decide to make perhaps the most popular TikTok recipe ever, Baked Feta Pasta, which is more correctly known as TikTok Pasta.

TikTok recipes tend to be easy to make, and this one is, too. It's just pasta cooked with feta cheese, cherry tomatoes, basil and olive oil.

Or, if we're being honest, it's pasta cooked with too much feta cheese, cherry tomatoes, basil and too much olive oil.

The dish was popularized on TikTok, though not

invented, by Yumna Jawad. She uses eight ounces of feta cheese and four ounces of olive oil to go with eight uncooked ounces of pasta. In a video she shot about the dish, she says it makes eight servings.

But it doesn't. A serving of pasta is officially two ounces, not one, and most Americans eat more than that. So you are actually getting two ounces of cheese and two tablespoons of oil per serving (Jawad, incidentally, says it is 1 1/2 tablespoons of oil per serving. You don't have to be good at math to be on TikTok).

How does it taste? Frankly, it tastes like too much feta cheese. But otherwise, it's a decent dish. If you plan to make it, I'd highly recommend using four ounces of feta and 1/4 cup of oil.

I next tried my hand at making Cloud Bread, which is thematically similar to Mermaid Toast. That is, its look is more important than its taste.

Cloud Bread is egg whites whipped to stiff peaks with sugar and cornstarch, and then baked at a low temperature.

Wait a minute. You can't fool me. That isn't bread, that is a soft meringue.

But here's the thing. Soft meringue is usually served with something. Served with a crême anglaise (a vanilla custard) it is a floating island. Served with a raspberry coulis, it is soft meringue on raspberry coulis.

Cloud Bread is served by itself, so it is just a meringue without enough sugar to be interesting. It tastes like whipped egg whites, and smells worse. You can certainly add vanilla to it, and then it tastes like whipped egg whites with vanilla. It's an improvement, but only marginal.

And then I made a TikTok KitKat Cheesecake, which is what it sounds like. It is an extra-rich cheesecake surrounded by KitKat candy bars, with chocolate ganache on top and more crushed KitKat candy bars on top of that.

In other words, it is a cheesecake with nearly a pound of candy on it, plus chocolate. And heavy cream.

By my calculation, it has more than 900 calories per serving, and the servings aren't large.

TikTok KitKat Cheesecake was invented by an Englishwoman, Eloise Head. Based on the nutritional content of her creation, I would guess she is still upset about the Revolutionary War and is taking out her anger on Americans who cook TikTok recipes.

For the record, I will acknowledge that the

cheesecake part of the recipe is light and fluffy and quite good — and even without the crust or the chocolate ganache or any of the candy bars, it is still 288 calories per serving.

The last Tik I Tokked was the best, TikTok Salmon Rice Bowl. Created by Emily Mariko, it mixes cooked salmon together with rice, soy sauce, sriracha sauce and Kewpie mayonnaise.

Yeah, good luck with that. Kewpie mayonnaise is currently the hottest condiment in America, and it immediately sells out anywhere you look for it. Made in Japan, Kewpie is said to be a savory, egg yolk-rich mayo. If you find it, let me know how it is.

I used Hellmann's. And in keeping with Mariko's video, I served it with avocado, kimchi and nori seaweed.

Basically, the dish is a very simple salmon donburi — a Japanese dish of rice with, in this case, salmon on it. By definition, donburi is served in a bowl; I used a plate, but if you want to be traditional you could put it in a deep bowl.

The smooth, fatty salmon is cut by the salty soy sauce, with the piquant fire of the sriracha tamed by the mayonnaise. Eaten on a piece of seaweed (optional, of course), with kimchi on the side (also optional), it is a marvelous combination.

But I'm not going to go back on TikTok to look for another.

TIKTOK PASTA

Yield: 4 servings

2 pints cherry tomatoes
1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil, see note
teaspoon sea salt
1/4 teaspoon black pepper
4 ounces feta cheese, see note
2 garlic cloves, minced
1/4 cup packed chopped fresh basil, plus more for serving
8 ounces dried pasta (small is best)
Note: To make the original recipe, use 8 ounces feta cheese and 1/2 cup olive oil.

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Place the cherry tomatoes in a 9-by-13-inch baking dish. Pour the olive oil on top, and season with salt and pepper. Toss until well combined.

2. Place the feta in the middle of the baking dish surrounded by the cherry tomatoes, and stir or flip to coat it with the olive oil and seasoning; keep the feta in the middle of the pan.

3. Bake 35 minutes, until the cherry tomatoes burst, and the feta cheese melts.

4. While the tomatoes and feta are baking, cook the pasta in a pot of salted water according to package instructions until al dente. Drain, reserving 1/2 cup of the cooking liquid.

5. Immediately add the garlic and basil leaves to the cooked



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TikTok Salmon Rice Bowl, a dish inspired by a TikTok video.

tomatoes and feta and toss everything to combine.

6. Transfer the cooked pasta to the baking dish and toss to combine. Add the reserved cooking liquid if the sauce is too dry. Garnish with more fresh basil and serve warm.

Per serving: 435 calories; 21 g fat; 6 g saturated fat; 25 mg cholesterol; 13 g protein; 50 g carbohydrate; 7 g sugar; 4 g fiber; 416 mg sodium; 173 mg calcium

— Adapted from a TikTok recipe by Yumna Jawad

CLOUD BREAD

Yield: 2 servings

3 large egg whites
2 1/2 tablespoons granulated sugar
1 tablespoon cornstarch
1/4 teaspoon vanilla extract, optional
Food coloring, optional

1. Preheat oven to 300 degrees. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

2. With an electric mixer on medium-high, whisk the egg whites until frothy. Add the sugar 1 tablespoon at a time and whisk on high until small bubbles form. Add the cornstarch and optional vanilla and food coloring. Whisk until peaks of egg white stand straight up when you lift out the whisk.

3. Place meringue on prepared baking sheet and mold into a mound or cloud shape. Bake until lightly brown, 20 to 25 minutes.

4. Serve immediately. The cloud deflates with time.

Per serving: 102 calories; no fat; no saturated fat; no cholesterol; 5 g protein; 20 g carbohydrate; 16 g sugar; 2 g fiber; 83 mg sodium; 4 mg calcium

— Recipe by iamafoodblog.com

TIKTOK KITKAT CHEESECAKE

Yield: 10 servings

38 KitKat fingers, divided
3 1/2 cups crushed digestive biscuits (cookies) or graham crackers, see note

11 tablespoons butter, melted
16 ounces cream cheese
1 cup powdered sugar, packed
2 1/2 cups heavy cream, divided
4 ounces semisweet chocolate
Note: Digestive biscuits are a traditional English cookie. They can be found in the international food aisles of many grocery stores and in international markets.

1. Stand up 32 KitKat fingers around the inside of an 8-inch cake pan, preferably springform. In a bowl, mix together the cookie crumbs and butter, and pour into the cake pan. Press down on the mixture until it is firm and even.

2. With an electric mixer, whisk together the cream cheese and powdered sugar until smooth. Add 2 cups of the heavy cream and mix until smooth and thick. Pour this mixture over the base and use a spoon to make smooth. Refrigerate at least 5 hours.

3. Break the remaining 6 KitKat fingers into small pieces.

4. Chop or break the chocolate into small pieces and place in a heatproof bowl. In a small pot, bring the remaining 1/2 cup cream to a boil and pour over the chopped chocolate (if using anything other than heavy cream, bring to just below a boil before pouring). Wait 1 minute and stir until smooth and thoroughly mixed.

5. Pour this chocolate mixture over the top of the cheesecake. Top with the chopped pieces of KitKat. Cover and refrigerate at least 2 hours.

Per serving: 852 calories; 58 g fat; 33 g saturated fat; 118 mg cholesterol; 8 g protein; 57 g carbohydrate; 42 g sugar; 2 g fiber;

251 mg sodium; 118 mg calcium — Adapted from a recipe by Eloise Head, via TikTok

TIKTOK SALMON RICE BOWL

Yield: 2 servings

1 (6-ounce) salmon fillet
1 teaspoon oil
1 1/2 cups cooked rice
1 tablespoon soy sauce
1 tablespoon sriracha
1 tablespoon mayonnaise, preferably Kewpie brand
1 avocado, sliced
Nori seaweed, optional
Kimchi, optional

1. Season salmon with salt and pepper, and cook in oil a small skillet over medium-high heat until browned on both sides and cooked all the way through, about 4 minutes on one side and 3 minutes on the other, depending on the size of the salmon.

2. Finely mash salmon with a fork in a large bowl, and add rice. If using leftover rice, place 1 ice cube on top, cover with parchment paper and microwave 1 minute. Discard parchment and ice cube. (If rice is freshly cooked, skip this part.)

3. Add soy sauce and stir until mixed. Garnish with sriracha, mayonnaise and avocado. If desired, serve on snack-sized pieces of nori seaweed, with kimchi on the side.

Per serving: 500 calories; 24 g fat; 3 g saturated fat; 46 mg cholesterol; 26 g protein; 50 g carbohydrate; 2 g sugar; 6 g fiber; 1,136 mg sodium; 51 mg calcium.



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