

The 1-2-3-4 Cake

I like to say flour is the deal breaker in this cake. And after testing this recipe with various flours I prefer cake flour for a lighter crumb. If you use all-purpose flour, sift it once before measuring. A few other things are important, like the room temperature temperature of ingredients and making sure the cake is cool before frosting. I let the butter come to room temperature on the counter, but if the kitchen's cold or you've forgotten, you can zap the butter - briefly! - in the microwave to soften. Also, I let the eggs come to room temp for greater volume. As a shortcut, place them in a bowl of warm water while the oven preheats. Make sure the whole milk is at room temperature or warm it slightly. And use good vanilla. If you want to be fussy and go for slightly more volume, separate the eggs and blend the egg yolks with the creamed butter and sugar mixture. After adding the flour alternately with the milk, fold in beaten egg whites and vanilla.

Makes 12 servings

Prep: 20 to 25 minutes

Bake: 25 to 30 minutes

Cake:

Butter and flour for prepping the pan

1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature

2 cups granulated sugar

4 large eggs, at room temperature

3 cups cake flour

2 1/2 teaspoons baking powder

1/2 teaspoon salt

1 cup whole milk

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Chocolate Pan Frosting (see below)

1. Place a rack in the center of the oven, and preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Grease two 9-inch round cake pans with butter and dust with flour. Shake out the excess flour, and set the pans aside.
2. Place the butter and sugar in a large mixing bowl and blend with an electric mixer on medium speed until light and fluffy, 1 to 2 minutes. Add the eggs, one at a time, beating until each is well incorporated. Scrape down the sides of the bowl. Set aside.
3. Stir together the flour, baking powder, and salt in a medium-size bowl. Add a third of the flour mixture to the butter and sugar, beating on low speed, until incorporated. Add half of the milk, and blend, then another third flour mixture, then rest of the milk, and finally the remaining flour mixture and vanilla and blend until combined and smooth, 30 seconds.
4. Divide the batter between the two prepared pans, and smooth the tops. Place the pans in the oven, and bake until they are lightly browned on top, and the cake springs back when lightly pressed in the center, 25 to 30 minutes.
5. Place the pans on cake racks to cool 10 minutes. Run a knife around the edges of the pans and give the pans a gentle shake to release the cake. Invert the layers once, then again, so they rest right-side up on the racks to completely cool, 30 minutes. Make the frosting, see below.
6. To assemble, place one layer on a cake plate or platter, a spoon about 2/3 cup frosting over the top. Place the second layer on top, and frost the top and sides of the cake with the remaining frosting. Slice and serve.

Chocolate Pan Frosting: Melt a stick of butter (salted or unsalted) in a medium-size saucepan over low heat, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir in 4 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder, a pinch of salt, and 1/3 cup whole milk. Cook, stirring, until the mixture thickens and just begins to come to a boil, 1 minute longer. Remove the pan from the heat. Stir in 2 cups of powdered sugar, a bit at a time, adding up to 1/2 cup more sugar or more milk if needed, until the frosting is smooth and just begins to thicken. It will set once it gets on the cake.