

Genuine Southern Biscuits

Tender, flaky, delicious—and ready in less than half an hour

BY JOHN MARTIN TAYLOR

I've always loved bread. When I lived in New York City, I rode the subway 80 blocks for my favorite loaf; as a freelance photographer in Paris, I walked two miles for *mon pain*; and while working in the Caribbean, I begged baguettes from friends who owned a French restaurant. Though I'll obviously go out of my way for a good crust, what I crave at breakfast, no matter where I am, is a real southern biscuit made with soft flour and fresh lard.

South, it has less protein than northern all-purpose or bread flour, meaning that it develops less gluten and keeps the biscuits tender. I use White Lily flour, but if you don't live in the South, where it's available in any grocery store, you can order it by mail (423/546-5511).

You can adapt southern biscuits for northern flour. I strongly recommend soft flour, but if you can't get your hands on it, you can mix some cake or pastry flour (which has a little less protein than soft southern flour) with an equal amount of all-purpose flour. You can also use straight all-purpose flour, which will make the biscuits slightly heavier but still

You'll want to eat biscuits every day once you try these. And because they're so quick to make, you can.

SOFT FLOUR MAKES THE BEST BISCUITS

Real southern biscuits need soft southern flour. Made from the winter wheat that grows in the



delicious. Because flours can vary in density, for best results measure whatever flour you use by weight rather than by volume.

QUICK RESULTS WITH BAKING POWDER

Most biscuit recipes call for baking powder as the leaven. A mix of certain acidic and alkaline compounds, it produces carbon dioxide, like yeast does, but in much less time. Because I don't like the metallic taste of aluminum sulfate in some baking powder brands, I make my own baking powder by combining equal parts cream of tartar and baking soda. Buttermilk, which adds a subtle tang to the biscuits, also mellows the alkaline taste of baking soda. You can also look for aluminum-free baking powders, which will say so on their packages.

My Appalachian grandmother lived well into her nineties and ate lard biscuits every day.

FOR TRUE SOUTHERN FLAVOR AND TEXTURE, USE LARD

To shorten biscuits, real southern cooks insist on fresh lard (rendered pork fat), which makes the flakiest pie crusts and the most delicately layered biscuits. Some misguided folks use butter or vegetable shortening, but if you ask me, they're not really making biscuits.

You may be happy to know that lard has about half the saturated fat of butter. And although vegetable shortening has less saturated fat than lard, that doesn't mean it's better for you: vegetable shortenings are partially hydrogenated, meaning they contain trans fats, which are thought to actually raise cholesterol. My Appalachian grandmother lived well into her nineties and ate lard biscuits every day. I follow her lead and simply avoid all processed foods, commercial shortenings included.

Rendering lard yourself is easy and ensures the best quality. While you can use lard from the grocery store, you might want to try rendering your own. Ask a butcher for freshly trimmed pork fat, ground or cubed. Melt the fat over low heat on the stove or in a warm oven until it's crystal-clear and any stray pieces of flesh have turned brown and sunk to the bottom of the pan. Strain the clear fat into a clean container; allow it to firm up at room temperature. Covered, it will keep in the refrigerator for months.

A LIGHT TOUCH AND QUICK HANDLING FOR TENDER BISCUITS

Given their simple list of ingredients, much of what makes biscuits irresistible is the way the dough is

Just the fingers, please! Use only your fingertips to briefly work the dough. Light handling means tender biscuits.

A quick punch shapes the biscuits. Use a biscuit cutter to keep the edges clean-cut for a good rise.



Photo below: Brian Hagiwara. All others: Jan Newberry

worked. Made right, the biscuits are light, tender, and flaky; handled too much, they'll be tough and leaden. **A light touch keeps the dough from developing too much gluten.** When the lard melts during cooking, it leaves little spaces to be filled by the gases released by the leavens. If the dough warms up during mixing, the lard will melt too soon, so don't use your hands to incorporate the lard or you'll end up with heavy biscuits. Instead, use a pastry cutter or two knives working in opposing directions to cut the lard into the dry ingredients just until there are no large clumps left. Use only your fingertips when mixing the ingredients; this keeps the dough cool and keeps you from overworking it and creating too much gluten, which will toughen your biscuits. You're just trying to get the ingredients in this fairly dry batter to hold together, no more.

Punch—don't press—your biscuits. When rolling out the dough, keep the pressure on the rolling pin light. Use a metal biscuit cutter dipped in flour to punch out the biscuits in a quick motion. Don't twist the cutter or press the dough or you'll seal the edges and the biscuits won't rise properly. Also, don't use an overturned glass; not only will it seal the edges, but it can compact the dough and make tough biscuits. If you don't have a biscuit cutter, simply cut the biscuits into squares with a sharp knife. Square biscuits also eliminate the problem of rerolled dough scraps. As you cut, put the biscuits on an ungreased baking sheet, close together but not touching. If they're too close, their edges won't cook and the biscuits will have a cakey texture; too far apart and they'll brown too quickly and be undercooked inside.

The recipe that follows is for authentic southern biscuits. They're so quick to make, you can easily treat yourself to them this Sunday for breakfast.

Genuine Southern Biscuits

This recipe calls for soft southern flour, but you can substitute the same amount of all-purpose flour or use a mix of half all-purpose and half cake flour. Flour and lard amounts are listed by weight (ounces) and volume (cups). Use either measurement. *Yields 18 two-inch biscuits.*

12 oz. (about 2²/₃ cups) soft southern flour; more for dusting
1 tsp. baking soda
1 tsp. cream of tartar
1 tsp. salt
3 oz. (about 1/3 cup plus 4 tsp.) chilled fresh lard, cut into 1-inch chunks
3/4 to 1 cup buttermilk

Put the oven rack in center position and heat the oven to 425°F. Sift the flour, baking soda, cream of tartar, and salt into a large bowl. With a pastry blender or two knives, cut in the lard until it is evenly mixed with the flour and there are no large clumps. Working swiftly, use a rubber spatula to fold in 3/4 cup buttermilk in three parts until it's just blended into the dry ingredients; add up to 1/4 cup more buttermilk if needed.

Lightly dust the work surface with flour and scoop the dough onto the counter with the spatula. Dust your fingers with flour. Using your fingertips only, lightly work the dough just until it holds together.

Roll the dough out about 1/2-inch thick and use a biscuit cutter to punch out 12 two-inch biscuits. After cutting the first dozen, quickly stack up scrap pieces, roll the dough out and cut more biscuits. This second string of biscuits won't rise as high but are still quite good.

Put the biscuits close to each other (but not touching) on an ungreased baking sheet and bake until the tops are light golden brown, 15 to 17 min. Serve immediately on their own or with butter, sour cream and preserves, or molasses.

John Martin Taylor, owner of Hoppin' John's, a culinary bookstore in Charleston, North Carolina, is the author of Hoppin' John's Lowcountry Cooking and The New Southern Cook (Bantam, 1992 and 1995). ♦



A sweet treatment for biscuits. A sugar cube dipped in orange juice and pressed into the top of each biscuit comes out of the oven like a sweet syrup.



Give your biscuits space, but not too much. Don't let them touch or their edges won't cook, but keep them close so they don't overcook.