

# Kitchen Scales for the Savvy Cook

Measuring by weight rather than by volume can make you a better baker

BY MAGGIE GLEZER

As a former cups-and-tablespoons-only baker, I understand the aversion many cooks have to using a kitchen scale. After all, most of us learned to bake with measuring cups and spoons. Our only exposure to a scale was probably in high school chemistry—not the friendliest of introductions. But after years of puzzling and inconsistent results, I finally realized that weighing dry ingredients is the best way to know exactly what's in my mixing bowl.

**Weighing ingredients is efficient and accurate.** Depending on whether it has been sifted, tapped down, or compacted, a cup of flour can vary in weight by two ounces or more—a substantial difference, especially when you're baking. Instead of fiddling with cups and careful, repeated scoopings and sweepings, weighing allows bakers to measure precisely, right into the mixing bowl. Cleanup is easier too: no swept-off ingredients to wipe up, no cups to wash.

## CHOOSE A SPRING OR ELECTRONIC SCALE

Two types of scale are available to home cooks: spring and electronic. (Unfortunately, affordable balance scales, possibly the most accurate and surely the most durable, are extremely difficult to find.)



*Get a good read. Look for a scale with easy-to-read metric and U.S. system markings.*

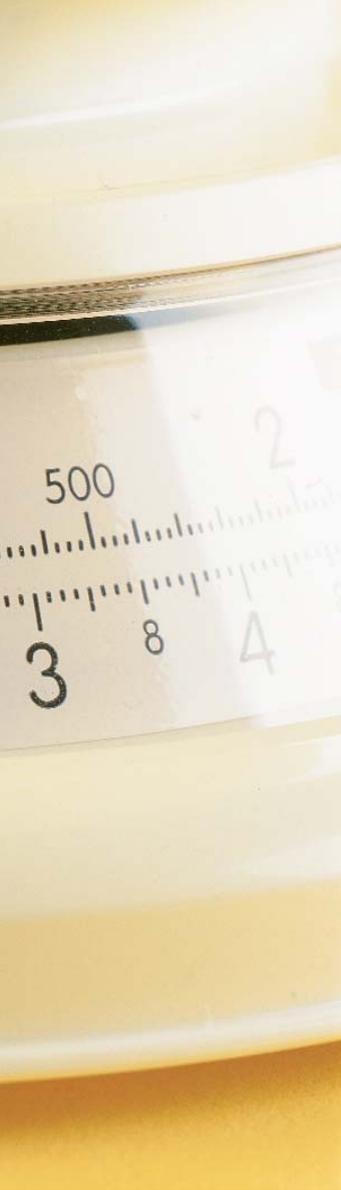


*A scale with a large weighing base will allow you to weigh ingredients in your largest mixing bowl.*



*Five quarters equal 1 ounce. Use them to check a scale's accuracy before you buy and to calibrate your scale at home.*

Photos: Susan Kahn



**Spring scales** use an old and inexpensive technology: a spring. Because of the way a spring works and the restricted space on the weight dial, spring scales either have fine graduations of measurement or a large capacity, but usually not both. Though spring scales aren't as sensitive or as accurate as electronic scales, a good one works fine for home bakers.

**Electronic scales** use a much newer, more sensitive, more accurate, and more expensive technology: assessing weight by electronic current. An LED readout displays the weight, so these scales can offer both a large capacity and fine graduations. But because electronic scales are relatively delicate and easily damaged, they may not be lasting investments.

#### LOOK FOR CAPACITY AND AN EASY TARE

Before you buy a scale, look at a floor model or ask a store clerk to unwrap one so you can consider it close up.

◆ **Look for a large-capacity scale with a wide weighing base.** Instead of using the usually tiny bowl that comes with the scale, I find it more convenient to measure dry ingredients into a mixing bowl. With a large-capacity scale, I can use my biggest, heaviest mixing bowl and weigh accurately even when doubling or tripling a recipe. A wide weighing base accommodates a range of bowl sizes. Too small a base may cause a bowl to topple. *Look for a capacity of at least 4 pounds or 2,000 grams.*



*Weigh all your dry ingredients right into your mixing bowl; there will be less to clean up.*

◆ **Be sure that the scale is easy to tare—that is, set to zero.** This feature is standard on all electronic scales, but some spring scales have tare features that are awkwardly placed or difficult to use.

◆ **Check for fine graduations to ensure accuracy.** If your scale measures in large increments (1 ounce, for example), the weight of your ingredients may be off enough to ruin your bread or cake. *Look for 1/4-ounce or 10-gram graduations in spring scales; 1/8-ounce or 2-gram graduations in electronic scales.*

◆ **Look for legible dials.** Electronic scales all have easy-to-read LED displays, but spring scales often have cramped dials with minute spaces between graduations. *Be sure your spring scale has graduations that are large enough to read easily.*

◆ **Find a scale with both metric and U.S. systems.** Although this country is stuck on U.S. measurements, metric really is easier, especially if you like to use foreign cookbooks or formulate recipes yourself. A scale that's convertible won't become outmoded.

◆ **Don't pay too much.** Price doesn't always indicate quality. You can get a good spring scale for around \$20. One of the better electronic scales costs less than \$45, even though some are \$100 and more.

#### TEST FOR ACCURACY BEFORE YOU BUY

Domestic-use scales are not held to any U.S. government standards, so you'll want to verify the accuracy of a scale before you buy one. A simple test is to weigh five quarters: the scale should read 1 ounce.

#### USING A SCALE IS SIMPLE

Set a bowl on the weighing base. If the scale is electronic, turn it on now: it should read zero. If the scale is a spring-type, you'll have to tare the dial (set it to zero) usually with a thumbscrew or a knob, so the weight of the bowl isn't measured. Pour in your first dry ingredient, adding to or subtracting from the amount in the bowl until the scale reads the desired weight. Tare the scale to read zero again, and then add the next dry ingredient, in its own distinct heap to allow for easier adjustments. Continue to weigh and tare until all the dry ingredients have been added.



*Taring—setting the scale to zero—ensures accuracy by subtracting the weight of your container and any previously weighed ingredients.*

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