Biscuits and Scones Share Tender Secrets

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Julia Moskin February 25, 2014

The American scone is a confection in crisis. Puffy and pale, supersized and supersweet, it has lost its purpose. Is it a muffin? Is it a pastry? Does it exist to be frosted with icing, or spread with jam — or only to crumble into the crevices of car upholstery?

This need not be. To taste a lofty, tender scone just as it should be, all you need is 30 minutes and basic pantry ingredients.

And once you've mastered scones, you'll automatically know how to make biscuits. All that separates them is two tablespoons of sugar and an egg.

British scone purists and Southern biscuit purists (and there are plenty of each) may shriek at this. But from a baker's perspective, "They are pretty much spot on the same," said Heather Bertinetti, the pastry chef at the Four Seasons restaurant in New York City.

Biscuits and scones sometimes seem to be from different planets, but they share a buttery, tender flakiness and the versatility that makes them a cornerstone recipe. Homemade scones dress up breakfast or brunch; biscuits go with everything from butter and jam to gravy and ham; mini biscuits can be flavored with cheese and herbs and trotted out for cocktail hour.

Top to bottom, from left: Ms. Bertinetti adds butter to dry ingredients, plus egg and cream. She kneads and shapes the dough and brushes the top with an egg wash.Credit...Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

In baking both, a few things are certain: the dough should be handled as little as possible; butter is the best-tasting fat (though vegetable shortening and lard have their partisans); and bakers will never stop trying to improve them.

Stacey Eames, the owner of the Highland bakeries in Atlanta, recently added a dollop of sour cream to her basic biscuit recipe, which makes the biscuits richer without adding weight. (Before refrigeration, clabber, which is soured milk, was a popular addition to biscuits.)

“I wanted to make a more dynamic biscuit,” she said, though her biscuits were already more than respectable. Ms. Eames has impeccable credentials, having grown up in her family’s restaurant in Albany, Ga., where biscuits (not to mention yeast rolls and corn bread) were baked fresh for every meal. “There is no one authentic Southern biscuit recipe,” she said, but there are mandates: the edges should have a nice crunch and the inside should be soft, not greasy. “You don’t have to put all the butter in the biscuit,” she said, “because you might want to put butter on the biscuit.”

American biscuits originated in the British Isles as scones, first mentioned in print in the 16th century. Traditional scones were never sweetened, said Elisabeth Luard, a director of the annual Oxford Symposium of Food and Cookery and the author of “The Old World Kitchen.” The proto-scone is believed to come from Scottish kitchens, where rounds of oat and barley dough were cooked on large griddles, then cut into wedges. They were a simple combination of fat, flour and liquid, which became softer and lighter as wheat, butter and leaveners like baking soda and baking powder became widely available.

Joe Dobias, the chef of Joe & Misses Doe in the East Village, makes one of New York's tallest and most popular biscuits. "I like to get three kinds of lift," he said.Credit...Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

In the 19th century, they remained invaluable as quick breads for home cooks, cheap and easy to make back when yeast was both expensive and perishable. (Dry yeast for home cooks wasn't invented until well into the 20th century.)

Upon arrival in the United States, the cousins went off in different directions.

Biscuits took over the South, where common ingredients like buttermilk, lard and low-protein soft wheat (which can produce more-tender biscuits than hard Northern wheat) are plentiful. The art and prestige of the Southern biscuit was raised to such a high level that now there are several biscuit-based restaurants outside the South, including Pine State Biscuits in Portland, Ore.; Biscuit Bitch in the Pike Place Market in Seattle; and Empire Biscuit in the East Village, open 24 hours a day with the goal of making the biscuit a universal food. (Motto: "Breakfast. Lunch. Dinner. Drunk.")

The scone, meanwhile, went underground, hanging by a thread in Anglophile pockets of New England and grand hotels that stubbornly served afternoon tea. The scone reappeared in the 1990s alongside the emerging coffee culture in the Pacific Northwest (Washington happens to have an existing scone cult: thousands of raspberry jam-filled Fisher Fair Scones are baked at the state fair every year, a tradition dating back to 1911).

Along with the macchiato and the barista, the scone charged across the land, paving the way for new creations: the late lamented orange-currant scones that Judy Rodgers baked at Zuni Café in San Francisco until 1997; savory cheese scones at the Cheese Board Collective in Berkeley, Calif.; pale classic rounds from the Sarabeth's restaurants; and nut-brown, craggy scones with dry notes like citrus and rosemary at Scratchbread in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn.

"Those are not actually scones, you realize," said a British friend, eyeing a selection of chunky, fruity, jammy, oaten, chocolate-streaked scones I brought her one morning.

Image

Heather Bertinetti, pastry chef at the Four Seasons, prepares scones.Credit...Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

But those additions matter less than the basic method, which is exactly the same for both biscuits and scones.

The trick to the master recipe here is in the geometry, as well as the cookery. Nothing besides tradition calls for round biscuits or wedge-shaped scones. Ms. Eames's biscuits are large squares; Ms. Bertinetti's scones are squares or rectangles. Cutting the dough in straight lines with a sharp, wide chef's knife helps the sides rise up in flaky layers. This approach all but eliminates dough scraps that must be clumped together and rolled out again (a common practice when you are using a biscuit cutter to make circular biscuits). Each time dough is rolled, it absorbs more flour and the flour's natural gluten gets more activated, which leads to tough crusts and flat biscuits.

Height is paramount to a good biscuit or scone. Joe Dobias, the chef and co-owner at the restaurant Joe & Misses Doe in the East Village, makes one of New York's tallest and most popular biscuits, served with a lush honey butter spiked with crunchy salt. "I like to get three kinds of lift," he said. "The heat, the leaveners and then the pressure." He uses a round biscuit cutter and huddles the unbaked biscuits tightly together, with each one pressed against its neighbors and the sides of the pan. As they bake and expand at high heat ("I'm a 425 guy," he said), the biscuits have nowhere to go but up.

For most home cooks, butter and cream produce the best results. As with pie crust, lard makes the flakier biscuit, and butter the tastier: this time, butter wins. Buttermilk is a traditional liquid for biscuits and used to contain more butterfat, but today it is a lean and sour product. Our recipe gets extra butterfat from heavy cream, making the interior tender and rich. Many traditional Southern bakers use self-rising flour for biscuits (finely ground, with leaveners already mixed in), but it can be hard to find elsewhere, and is usually bleached. All-purpose flour can make perfect scones and biscuits, said Ms. Bertinetti; she's more concerned about fine-tuning the salt and sugar content. Baking powder, the usual leavener for scones and biscuits, contains baking soda, which is salty. "People don't realize that salt not only tastes salty, but it makes sweet things taste sweeter," she said. "And salt also contributes to browning, which you definitely want in a scone or a biscuit."

There is one final similarity worth mentioning. Both scones and biscuits stale quickly, which is another argument for eating them out of your oven, not out of a bakery case.

Recipes: **Master Recipe for Biscuits and Scones** | **Orange-Currant Scones** | **Salted Honey Butter**