

Scone Simplicity: Forget The Bakery

BY NOELLE CARTER
Los Angeles Times (MCT)

Scones are one of the basic pleasures in life. Like biscuits with a touch of added sweetness, the best scones are delicate and light yet somehow wonderfully rich, each bite suggesting bits of butter that have all but disappeared, leaving behind tender, flaky layers. A scone is a singular work of art, yet any sweet or savory flavorings just add to the magic.

And as hard as it may be to resist a beautiful scone in a bakery display case, nothing beats the flavor of homemade.

Like biscuits, scones are part of the quick bread family, rustic cousins to more refined pastries and cakes. Just like the quick bread name suggests, scones come together quickly, a few ingredients only briefly mixed before baking.

Simple as they may be, there is an art to a great scone, and it starts with ingredients. Don't bother with a packaged mix — it should take no more than a few minutes to gather the six or so ingredients you'll need, and you have more room to be creative when you work from scratch.

Some flour, a little sugar and salt, and a leavener will get you started. Whisk them together in a large bowl, then add some cold butter. Cut in the butter as if you were making a pie crust, just enough so you can still see little chunks of butter, being careful not to overmix. As the scones bake, those bits of butter will melt into the scones, and the steam will give the pastry layers as the butterfat lends richness.

As soon as the butter is added, stir any sweet or savory flavorings into the crumbly mix. Currants may be classic, but feel free to use your imagination. Try chocolate chips or grated ginger for a sweet scone; shredded prosciutto and cheese, perhaps some chopped fresh herbs, will lend wonderful savory notes.

Stir in a little liquid to bind. Buttermilk has a gentle tang, though cream or even regular milk will work just fine. Some recipes call for egg, but it's not necessary. Work the dough gently, pressing and kneading a few times, just until it comes together. The trick is to have a delicate touch, or your tender scones will toughen.

Cut the dough into wedges or rounds and bake until puffed and lightly golden, 25 to 30 minutes. While biscuits are best served fresh out of the oven, scones can be baked ahead of time, ready to go whether you're serving them for a celebratory brunch or a simple snack, even afternoon tea. A basic pleasure, best shared with others.

Adding Flavors To The Mix

Scones can be flavored in any of a number of ways, both sweet and savory. Give one or more of these ideas a try (flavorings are measured for one batch of scones), then riff on your own:

CURRANT SCONES

Add 1 1/2 cups dried currants. Consider soaking them in a little fruit juice or liquor (Grand Marnier is wonderful).

CHOCOLATE CHIP SCONES

Add 1 2/3 cups chocolate chips: Fold in semisweet or bittersweet chocolate chips, perhaps with some nuts or a little orange zest.

GINGER SCONES

Add 2 tablespoons grated ginger to give a nice tang.

JALAPENO-CHEDDAR

Roast, peel, seed and chop 2 jalapenos (or more), and add them to the dry ingredients along with 1 cup of grated cheddar cheese.

CHIVE-PARMESAN

Add 1/2 cup of chopped fresh chives to the dry ingredients along with 1 cup of grated Parmesan. Form the scones, then sprinkle a little more cheese over right before baking.

PROSCIUTTO-SWISS

Chop 4 ounces sliced prosciutto and add to the dry ingredients along with 1 cup of grated Swiss cheese.

Basic Scones

Total time: 50 minutes, plus cooling time

Servings: 8
Note: If you'd like to add any flavorings to your scones, it's best to add them after cutting in the butter and before stirring in the liquid.

3 cups (12 3/4 ounces) flour
4 teaspoons baking powder
3/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 cup sugar
1/2 cup (1 stick) cold butter, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
1 cup cold buttermilk, milk or cream
2 tablespoons heavy cream
2 teaspoons turbinado or

coarse decorating sugar

1. Heat the oven to 375 degrees. In a large mixing bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, salt and sugar. Cut in the butter until the mixture is crumbly. Stir in the buttermilk just until incorporated; the dough will be crumbly and look dry. Knead in the bowl a few times to bring the dough together into a single mass.
2. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured work surface and press into a circle roughly 7 inches in diameter and 1 inch

thick. Cut the dough into 8 wedges, and place the wedges on a parchment-lined baking sheet.
3. Brush the wedges with the cream and sprinkle over the turbinado sugar. Bake on the center rack until golden, about 25 to 30 minutes. Remove the scones to a rack to cool slightly. Serve warm or at room temperature.
Each servings: 321 calories; 6 grams protein; 44 grams carbohydrates; 1 gram fiber; 14 grams fat; 8 grams saturated fat; 37 mg cholesterol; 9 grams sugar; 498 mg sodium.



ANNE CUSACK/LOS ANGELES TIMES/MCT
Scones are one of the basic pleasures in life. Like biscuits with a touch of added sweetness, the best scones are delicate and light yet somehow wonderfully rich. Pictured: Chocolate chip scone.

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