

BASIC CAKE DECORATING

with Susan Reid

Most bakers are comfortable baking a cake; it's the frosting and decorating that can be intimidating. Decorating a cake to look as good as it tastes can take a bit of practice, but it's not difficult. We'll show you a number of basic techniques that can give you a vast range of beautiful looks once you put them together. Start by making two round cake layers from your favorite recipe. Once they're cool, wrap them well and place them in the refrigerator to firm up while you make some buttercream frosting. We've chosen an Italian buttercream because it spreads very easily, holds its shape when sculpted or piped, won't separate or curdle when other flavors are added, and tastes wonderful. Confectioners' sugar frostings take less time to put together, but are more difficult to work with for a truly polished look.



CHAPTER ONE: MAKING BUTTERCREAM FROSTING

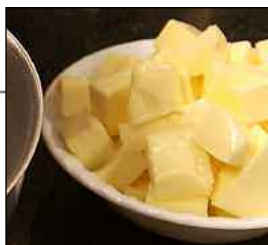
What You'll Need



A stand mixer is a must for making buttercream.



You'll also need a saucepan and a ThermoPen® thermometer or candy thermometer.



BEFORE YOU DO ANYTHING

Take the butter for the recipe out of the refrigerator. Cut it into 1-inch cubes. It will need at least 2 hours at room temperature to be the right consistency to be added to the frosting.

Buttercream frosting is made by whipping egg whites and sugar together to make a meringue. A cooked sugar syrup is carefully poured into the meringue to cook and stabilize it, then it's whipped until cooled to room temperature. Butter and flavoring are added to make a frosting with a beautiful, silky texture.

The recipe will yield 7 cups of frosting, which is enough to fill, frost, and decorate a 2- or 3-layer cake.

What You'll Need

Meringue

- 8 large egg whites OR
- 1 1/4 cups (10 ounces) cool water and
- 1/2 cup (3 ounces) meringue powder
- 1 teaspoon cream of tartar (omit if using meringue powder)
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup (3 1/2 ounces) granulated sugar

Sugar syrup

- 1 1/4 cups (8 3/4 ounces) sugar
- 1/2 cup (4 ounces) water

To finish the frosting

- 1 1/2 pounds (6 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract or other flavoring



The egg whites will stand straight up when the whisk is lifted. This meringue is ready for the syrup to be added. You can whip the egg whites to this point and let them sit while you're cooking the syrup, if you like.



Slowly pour the water into the sugar, to keep sugar from splashing up the sides of the pot.

To make the meringue

Place the egg whites or meringue powder and water in the bowl of your stand mixer, fitted with the whisk attachment. Whip until the whites begin to foam. With the mixer running at high speed, gradually add the sugar and continue whipping until the whites form stiff peaks, as shown in the picture, top left.

To make the syrup

Place the sugar in a medium-sized saucepan. Slowly add the water, and place the pan over medium-high heat.

Stir once or twice to moisten the sugar evenly, then put your spoon away; stirring it once the mixture boils will only encourage crystals to form, which you don't want.

Cook the syrup to just short of caramelizing; it should reach 248°F to 250°F. Depending on the size of your saucepan, this will take 5 to 8 minutes. At first the bubbles will be small; check the temperature as shown below.

As you continue to boil, the bubbles will make a popping sound as the syrup thickens. This syrup is ready to use.



This syrup has been boiling for 3 minutes. It's on its way, but not ready quite yet.



Time to remove the pan from the stove and add the hot syrup to the meringue.



Carefully pour the hot syrup into the whites, taking care not to let it fall on the moving whisk or on the side of the mixing bowl.

Turn the mixer on low to medium speed, and carefully pour the syrup between the whisk and the side of the bowl.

If your mixer doesn't have enough clearance to do this, add the syrup in small amounts with the mixer stopped, and turn it on in quick bursts between additions to keep the syrup moving through the egg whites.

Once all of the syrup is added, leave the mixer running. The meringue needs to cool to 80°F before any butter is added. You can shorten the time this takes by placing zip-top bags with some ice in them around the outside of the mixing bowl.

Once the meringue is cool to the touch, add the butter two tablespoons at a time. The meringue will deflate a bit, and may even curdle. Don't worry if this happens: just keep the mixer running on high speed, and the frosting will come together.



At first, the frosting may look curdled. Don't worry; keep beating and it will come together..

Once most of the butter is added, add one to two teaspoons of your favorite flavoring or extract, such as vanilla or almond. You can also add a drop or two of a strong flavoring, like coconut; 3/4 cup of fruit purée; or melted chocolate, depending on the kind of cake you plan to make.

Add the remaining butter, and mix until the frosting is smooth. Now you're ready to begin assembling the cake.



The finished buttercream is smooth and silky; keep it at room temperature while you frost the cake.