

German Pancake

What's the secret to achieving a tender, custardy base and a crispy, puffy rim? Ignoring one of the cardinal principles of baking.

≧ BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN ≦

The German pancake, sometimes called a Dutch baby, is a study in contrasts: The edge of the skillet-size breakfast specialty puffs dramatically to form a tall, crispy rim with a texture similar to that of a pop-over while the base remains flat, custardy, and tender, like a thick crêpe. Luckily, this entertaining treat is far easier to prepare than its pomp and circumstance would suggest. A stir-together batter of flour, egg, and milk is simply poured into a skillet and baked. Sometimes sautéed apples are incorporated into the batter. The pancake may also be served with a fruit topping, drizzled with syrup, or sprinkled with sugar and lemon juice.

Ballooning Up

After auditioning a number of recipes, I settled on a routine: Caramelize sliced apples with sugar in a skillet (using nonstick ensures an easy release), pour in the batter, and place the filled skillet in a 375-degree oven (the highest temperature most nonstick skillets are rated to withstand). After 20 minutes, the rim of this pancake browned and puffed while the base remained flat, with a custardy texture. However, the rim wasn't particularly tall—it had risen only 1 inch.

That said, it was interesting that it had puffed at all, since I hadn't added any leavener or incorporated air into the eggs. Rather than relying on a chemical reaction or the expansion of an egg foam to provide lift (as in a soufflé), a German pancake inflates more like a balloon (or a popover): Heat begins to set the gluten and egg proteins on the surface of the batter, forming a flexible shell. Meanwhile, water inside this shell turns to steam; the trapped steam causes the pancake "balloon" to inflate. Since popovers are made in small, cup-shaped tins, the batter is in close contact with the sides of the tins and the heat of the oven and thus inflates uniformly. A German pancake, on the other hand, bakes in a wide, shallow vessel and cooks more quickly at the edges, which are in



The puffy rim starts to deflate after the pancake is removed from the oven, so it is best served immediately for maximum dramatic effect.

contact with the hot sides of the skillet. This results in a distinct rim and base.

Puff Piece

I wondered if the apple filling was weighing things down and preventing the rim from fully expanding. If so, it would be easy enough to turn it into a topping. Testing my theory, I whisked together another batch of my basic mix: 5 eggs and 1½ cups each of flour and milk, along with salt, vanilla, lemon zest, and a pinch of nutmeg (all standard flavorings). I melted

the batter was an even 1 inch deep. As the batter at the edges started to rise up out of the pan—at about the 20-minute mark—the batter in the center of the pan was still fluid. Over time, as the edges started to creep northward and the rim inflated, the rim pulled more and more of the batter into itself; as that happened, the level at the center of the pan dropped. Eventually, even the center of the pancake began to set, and it began to puff there as well. But there was so little batter left at that point that it was still paper-thin.

a couple of pats of butter in a skillet, added the batter, and transferred it to the oven.

Sure enough, the rim of this no-fruit pancake rose much higher, about 3 inches. But the rim verged on dry, and the section of pancake alongside the rim was overly thick and dense. Meanwhile, the very center was paper-thin. It was as if the batter had moved like an ocean wave toward the edges of the pan during baking, crested, and stayed that way.

I added an extra egg to push the texture in the direction I wanted. One more egg made the base more custardy, but it didn't add substance to the very center. The additional moisture and fat also mitigated some of the dryness at the edge. But there was a limit to the benefits since yet another egg made the pancake taste too eggy. Could I make the very center of the pancake more substantial by adding more flour? An additional ¼ cup did create a bit more depth, but any more than that made the pancake too dry.

At this point, I needed to better understand the mechanics of the dish in order to make more progress toward my goals. So I peered through the oven door during baking. When I put the skillet into the oven,

Heating Butter Until Foaming Subsides?

Butter starts to melt at about 85 degrees and is completely liquefied at 94 degrees; when it reaches 190 degrees, it starts to foam. This is an indication that its water is evaporating and the milk proteins are forming a froth. At 212 degrees, the bubbling becomes more vigorous and the foaming subsides. While many recipes call for heating butter to this point to ensure that it's very hot, we don't typically use this direction. That's because we don't often use butter in applications that would require a really high temperature (such as frying or sautéing). In the case of German pancakes, we need only to melt the butter before pouring in the batter since it will continue to heat in the oven.

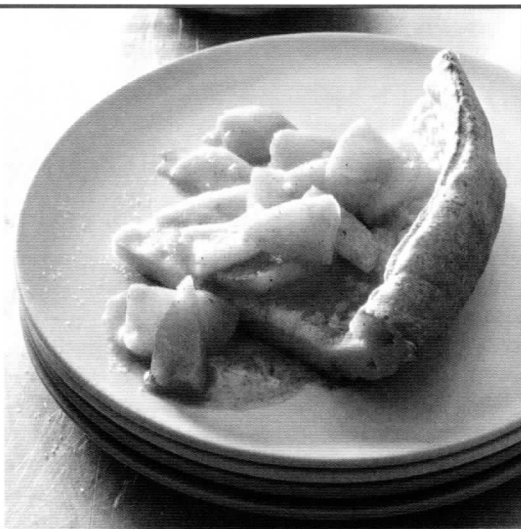


Look: It Puffs

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/june17](https://www.cooksillustrated.com/june17)

For a More Satisfying Pancake, Start It in a Cold Oven

Most German pancake recipes call for pouring the batter into a preheated skillet and/or using a preheated oven. This means that the batter at the edges heats and puffs up very quickly, drawing some of the batter from the middle of the skillet with it and resulting in a pancake that's superthin at the center. Starting in a cold oven, on the other hand, allows the heat to build up slowly enough that the center can start to set (and maintain its thickness) before the oven reaches the temperature necessary to give maximum lift to the rim (which takes about 25 minutes). A thicker center is more satisfying to eat and is better able to stand up to a fruit topping.



GERMAN PANCAKE

SERVES 4

A traditional 12-inch skillet may be used in place of the nonstick skillet; coat it lightly with vegetable oil spray before using. As an alternative to sugar and lemon juice, serve the pancake with maple syrup or our Brown Sugar–Apple Topping (recipe follows). Our recipes for German Pancake for Two and Brown Sugar–Banana Topping are available free for four months at CooksIllustrated.com/june17.

- 1 3/4 cups (8 3/4 ounces) all-purpose flour
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon grated lemon zest plus 1 tablespoon juice
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/8 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 1/2 cups milk
- 6 large eggs
- 1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter

TESTING Syrup Dispensers

Pouring maple syrup or honey onto your breakfast can result in sticky tables, counters, fingers, and more—especially when kids are involved. Maple syrup dispensers promise to reduce mess when pouring the sweet stuff over pancakes and waffles. We tested five models priced from \$7.80 to \$42.00, and one quickly moved to the front of the pack. Its simple design made it easy to fill and clean, and it poured like a dream. One minor quibble: It's not microwave-safe. But it's a mess-saver and a bargain at just about eight bucks. For the complete testing results, go to CooksIllustrated.com/june17.

—Lisa McManus

RECOMMENDED AMERICAN METALCRAFT Beehive Syrup Dispenser, 6 oz

MODEL: BSD64

PRICE: \$7.80

COMMENTS: This winning dispenser's spring-loaded spout cover worked like a charm and can be opened as much or as little as you like, allowing you to pour neatly and precisely. It was easy to fill and clean, too.

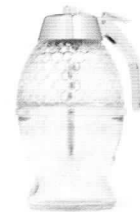


NOT RECOMMENDED NORPRO Honey/Syrup Dispenser

MODEL: 780

PRICE: \$18.99

COMMENTS: This vessel dispenses from its bottom, which sits in a base that can be filled with warm water to keep syrup soft and flowing. It works beautifully until it's time to refill—an awkward, messy operation.



How Low Could I Go?

I needed the batter at the very center to set before too much of it had migrated toward the edges. But the pancake was cooking from the outer edges inward. Would lowering the oven temperature even things out? I whipped up another batch of batter and reduced the temperature to 350 degrees. It helped, but only a little. When I went down to 325 degrees, my pancake was substantially thicker at the center, but the edges no longer rose as dramatically. Clearly the pancake needed to be above a certain temperature to ensure sufficient lift. But I was on the right track, since slowing the rate at which the pancake puffed gave the center time to set before the batter rose up the side of the rim. How about starting low and finishing high? For my next test, I started the pancake in a 250-degree oven and increased the temperature to 375 degrees after 10 minutes. Better but still not quite right. That's when I went for broke: I put the pan into a cold oven and then set the oven to 375 degrees.

This approach worked like a charm, allowing the heat to build up slowly enough that the center of the pancake could start to set before the oven reached the temperature necessary to give maximum lift to the rim (which took about 30 minutes). Now the pancake formed a near-perfect bowl shape, with a beautifully tall, crispy rim and a moist, custardy, evenly thick base. I devised a brown sugar–based topping with apples, but the pancake was a treat even with nothing more than a drizzle of maple syrup or a squeeze of lemon juice and dusting of sugar.

A German Pancake or a Dutch Baby?

German pancakes and Dutch babies are essentially the same thing, but the dish is said to have originated in Germany, not the Netherlands. The term “Dutch baby” was coined by an American restaurateur whose use of “Dutch” was a corruption of the word “Deutsch” (“German” in German). “Baby” referred to the fact that the restaurant served miniature versions.

1. Whisk flour, 3 tablespoons sugar, lemon zest salt, and nutmeg together in large bowl. Whisk milk eggs, and vanilla together in second bowl. Whisk two-thirds of milk mixture into flour mixture until no lumps remain, then slowly whisk in remaining milk mixture until smooth.

2. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position. Melt butter in 12-inch oven-safe nonstick skillet over medium-low heat. Add batter to skillet, immediately transfer to oven, and set oven to 375 degrees. Bake until edges are deep golden brown and center is beginning to brown, 30 to 35 minutes.

3. Transfer skillet to wire rack and sprinkle pancake with lemon juice and remaining 1 tablespoon sugar. Cut into wedges and serve.

BROWN SUGAR–APPLE TOPPING

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

You can substitute Honeycrisp or Fuji apples for the Braeburn apples, if desired.

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1/3 cup water
- 1/4 cup packed (1 3/4 ounces) brown sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/8 teaspoon salt
- 1 1/4 pounds Braeburn apples (3 to 4 apples), peeled, cored, halved, and cut into 1/2-inch-thick wedges, wedges halved crosswise

Melt butter in 12-inch skillet over medium heat. Add water, sugar, cinnamon, and salt and whisk until sugar dissolves. Add apples, increase heat to medium-high, and bring to simmer. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally, for 5 minutes. Uncover and continue to cook until apples are translucent and just tender and sauce is thickened, 5 to 7 minutes longer. Transfer to bowl and serve. (Topping can be refrigerated for up to 2 days.)