

# HOW TO MAKE BISCUITS

The Secrets of the South's  
Most Famous Bread



BY VIRGINIA WILLIS  
with photography by Angie Mosier

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photographs by Angie Mosier and Virginia Willis



Bread is one of the most basic of foods, and it's a symbol of hospitality all over the world. There is no act more trusting than sharing bread with someone.

In many cultures breaking bread signifies an act of peace. Regardless of the type of grain, bread occupies an important place in nearly every civilization, society, and culture on earth.

I've been making biscuits since I was a small child. It's the bread of my people. I love to teach, to empower people how to make biscuits.

From all about Southern flour to tips on making great biscuits, this booklet is a tight little package of recipes. It includes the definitive how-to photo series showing how to mix, stir, fold, roll, and knead. It also contains how to make biscuits in the food processor and vegan biscuits.

Included are recipes for Buttermilk Biscuits, Cathead Biscuits, Black Pepper Cream Cheese Biscuits, Herb and Cheese Drop Biscuits, Lightened Up Better for You Biscuits with Turkey Sausage Gravy, Cakey Biscuits with Chocolate Gravy, and Brown Sugar Strawberry Shortcakes. (And, I've included the nutritional information for them all.)

On that note, I lost 65# and have kept it off for over 4 years. With my health journey, I am often asked if I still eat biscuits. Of course I eat biscuits! It's part of my Good and Good for You™ approach to life. You're on the right track as long as you're doing what's Good and Good for You™, more often than not.

So when I eat biscuits I want them to be the best biscuits - and in this book you will find my favorite biscuit recipes. I know you can make great biscuits, too.

You can do it!

*Bon Appetit y'all!  
Virginia Willis*



## SOUTHERN FLOUR

Wheat flour contains two proteins, glutenin and gliadin. When you combine flour with water, the proteins create a strong and elastic sheet called gluten. Flours vary in their protein levels, which affects the texture of baked goods.

Gluten gives structure to yeast breads, but is not recommended for tender cakes, biscuits, and quick breads. Southern all-purpose flour is milled from soft red winter wheat that has less gluten-forming protein. It is typically bleached, which makes it whiter, but this does not affect the protein. My family has always used White Lily flour, a staple across the South; another dependable Southern brand is Martha White.

Most national brands of all-purpose flour are a combination of soft winter wheat and higher-protein hard summer wheat. White Lily contains approximately nine grams of protein per cup of flour, whereas national brands can contain eleven or twelve grams of protein per cup of flour. If you live outside the South, White Lily is available online or in some specialty shops.

For results similar to those of Southern flour, substitute one part all-purpose flour and one part cake flour to equal the amount of Southern flour in a recipe. Finally, high-protein flour absorbs more liquid than does low-protein flour; if you attempt to make biscuits with a high-protein flour, you will need to add more liquid.



Biscuits made with a national brand of all-purpose flour on the left; White Lily all-purpose flour on the right.

## TIPS FOR MAKING GREAT BISCUITS

- 1 Chill the bowl used to mix the dough and the pastry blender to prevent the fat (such as butter, shortening, or lard) from warming up.
- 2 Cut the butter into flour until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Cold bits of butter or fat will melt during baking, creating pockets of steam that give biscuits their flakiness.
- 3 When working with butter, cut it into small pieces and chill again before adding to the dry ingredients.
- 4 Dip the cutter in flour before each cut. Cut the dough smoothly and cleanly straight down without twisting. Twisting can seal the dough and prevent rising.
- 5 As my mentor Nathalie Dupree used to tell me, "Get your hot little hands off that dough." Handle the dough a little as possible. You don't want to make the biscuits tough by overworking, and you want the fat to stay cold until the biscuits bake.
- 6 A very hot oven is essential. The steam interacts with the baking powder to create the biscuit's ideal textures inside and out.
- 7 The perfect biscuit should be golden brown and slightly crisp on the outside, with a light, airy interior.
- 8 Vegan Biscuits: Adapting a buttermilk biscuit recipe to vegan is easy! Simply use plant butter and plant based milk, preferably unsweetened oat milk, acidified with 1 teaspoon of vinegar per cup.

# HOW TO MAKE BISCUITS



Using a pastry blender, cut the chilled cubed butter into the flour mixture. The butter coats the flour and will prevent the absorption of moisture, therefore lessening the activation of the gluten.



Stop cutting when the butter bits are about the size of small peas. The butter will melt during baking, creating pockets of steam that give biscuits their flakiness.



Add the buttermilk and stir to combine, but do not stir until it is a smooth dough. You don't want to overwork the dough and activate the gluten.



Turn the shaggy mass out onto a floured work surface. Flour is your friend!



Using a bench scraper, turn the dough a few times until it starts to come together.



Shape the dough into a rectangle. Try not to touch the dough with your warm hands so the butter stays cold.



Using a floured rolling pin, start at the middle of the dough and roll backward without coming off the edge. Then start in the middle of the dough and roll forward without coming off the edge. This will help keep the dough even.



Using your bench scraper, rotate the dough so it does not stick to the work surface. Add more flour, if needed.



Using a floured circular cutter, punch out the biscuits. Do not twist as you punch, as that would seal the edges and possibly inhibit the biscuit's rise.



Place the biscuits on the baking sheet. If the biscuits touch, the sides will be soft and tender. If they do not touch, the sides will be crispier.



Do not ball the scraps of dough in a knot. Instead, layer the scraps and pat them together. Reroll following the same procedure and punch out the remaining biscuits.



The biscuits are ready for the oven! A very hot oven is essential to create the biscuits' ideal texture inside and out.



# CATHEAD BISCUITS

Makes about 9 biscuits

The term cathead biscuit is an authentic one, indicating that it's a biscuit as large as a cat's head, and a phrase my grandfather once used. This extra-large biscuit would not have been the norm on the everyday table, but it has become the standard size for fast-food biscuits.

Don't want a big 'ole cathead biscuit? You can divide the recipe in half and use a smaller cutter to make smaller biscuits, or leave the recipe as is, use a smaller cutter, and simply make more.

**4 cups all-purpose flour, preferably Southern, plus more for rolling out**

**2 tablespoons baking powder**

**2 teaspoons fine sea salt**

**8 tablespoons (½ cup) cold unsalted butter, cut into cubes and chilled**

**2 cups buttermilk**

Heat the oven to 500°F. Line a baking sheet with a silicone baking mat. (You can also bake the biscuits on an ungreased baking sheet.)

In a bowl, combine the flour, baking powder, and salt. Using a pastry blender or two knives, cut the butter into the flour mixture until it resembles coarse meal. Pour in the buttermilk and mix until just barely combined. It will be a shaggy mass. (Alternatively, you can mix the dough in a food processor: Pulse to combine the flour, baking powder, and salt.

Add the butter and pulse until it resembles coarse meal. Pour in the buttermilk through the feed tube and pulse until just barely combined. It will be a shaggy mass.)

Turn the shaggy mass out onto a lightly floured surface. Knead lightly, using the heel of your hand to compress and push the dough away from you, then fold it back over itself. Give the dough a small turn and repeat four or five times. (It's not yeast bread; you want to just barely activate the gluten, not overwork it.)

Using a lightly floured rolling pin, roll the dough out 1 inch thick. Cut out rounds of dough with a 3 ½-inch round cutter dipped in flour; press the cutter straight down without twisting so the biscuits will rise evenly when baked.

Place the biscuits on the prepared baking sheet. If the biscuits are baked close together, the sides will be tender. If the biscuits are baked farther apart, the sides will be crisp. (I always say biscuits are like people: If you are close to your neighbor, you will be tender, and if you aren't close to your neighbor, you will be crisp!)

Once you've punched out the first round from the dough, you can reroll the scraps. However, do not simply roll them into a ball; this will create a knot of gluten strands. Instead, place the pieces one on top of the other in layers. Then roll out and repeat punching out the biscuits.

Bake until golden brown, 10 to 12 minutes. Transfer to a rack to cool just slightly. Serve warm.

## CATHEAD BISCUITS

**Calories** 326kcal **Carbohydrates** 46g **Protein** 8g **Fat** 12g **Saturated Fat** 7g **Polyunsaturated Fat** 1g **Monounsaturated Fat** 3g **Trans Fat** 0.4g **Cholesterol** 33mg **Sodium** 937mg **Potassium** 135mg **Fiber** 2g **Sugar** 3g **Vitamin A** 400IU **Calcium** 230mg **Iron** 3mg

# HERB AND CHEESE DROP BISCUITS

Makes about 16 biscuits

These Herb and Cheese Drop Biscuits are like biscuits with training wheels! You simply spoon the dough onto the baking sheet. The dough is wetter, containing more buttermilk than a traditional biscuit recipe. This wet dough creates steam in the hot oven, for feather-light biscuits.

**2 cups self-rising flour (see Note, below)**

**4 tablespoons cold unsalted butter**

**1 tablespoon freshly chopped parsley, chives, or sage**

**4 tablespoons grated sharp cheddar cheese (about 1 ounce)**

**Pinch of cayenne pepper (optional)**

**1 ½ cups buttermilk**

Heat the oven to 450°F. Line two rimmed baking sheets with parchment paper or silicone baking mats.

Place the flour in a medium bowl. Using a pastry blender, cut the butter into the flour until the crumbs are the size of peas. Add the herbs, 3 tablespoons of the cheese, and the cayenne, if using; stir to combine. Blend in the buttermilk with a spatula to form a soft dough.

Drop the dough by rounded tablespoonfuls onto the prepared baking sheets. Sprinkle with the remaining tablespoon of cheese. Bake until lightly browned, about 20 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack to cool slightly, then serve immediately while still warm.

## NOTE

Self-rising flour is bleached all-purpose flour that is low in protein and contains a leavening agent and salt. It is widely available in the South, but less so in other regions of the country.

If you have a recipe that calls for self-rising flour but it's not available to you, use the following formula to make your own: To 1 cup of Southern all-purpose flour add, 1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder and 1/2 teaspoon fine sea salt.

## HERB AND CHEESE DROP BISCUITS

**Calories** 70kcal **Carbohydrates** 12g **Protein** 3g **Fat** 1g **Saturated Fat** 0.5g **Polyunsaturated Fat** 0.2g **Monounsaturated Fat** 0.2g **Cholesterol** 2mg **Sodium** 24mg **Potassium** 47mg **Fiber** 0.4g **Sugar** 1g **Vitamin A** 58IU **Vitamin C** 0.3mg **Calcium** 29mg **Iron** 0.2mg



# BLACK PEPPER CREAM CHEESE BISCUITS

Makes 36 (1½-inch) biscuits

Cream cheese biscuits are like biscuits with training wheels. They are hard to mess up and are absolutely delicious. Baker's note: In testing, I found that 1 cup was necessary with King Arthur all-purpose flour and ¾ cup was more appropriate for White Lily flour.

These tasty biscuits were inspired by the flavor and texture of "Callie's Charleston Biscuits." I split them and stuff them with thinly sliced country ham, too, and here I've topped them with Pear Mostarda.

**4 cups all-purpose flour, plus more for rolling out the biscuits**

**2 tablespoons baking powder**

**1 ½ teaspoons fine sea salt**

**8 tablespoons (½ cup) unsalted butter, at room temperature**

**1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese, at room temperature**

**¾ to 1 cup buttermilk, plus more for brushing the biscuits**

**2 teaspoons freshly ground black pepper, plus more for the top**

**Sliced ham, for serving (optional)**

**Jam, Jelly, or Preserves, for serving**

Heat the oven to 500°F. Line a baking sheet with a silicone baking mat.

In a food processor, pulse together the flour, baking powder, and salt. Add the butter and cream cheese and pulse to combine. Add ¾ cup of the buttermilk and the pepper; process until the dough starts to come away from the sides of the bowl, adding the remainder of the buttermilk, if necessary. The dough should pull from the sides of the bowl.

Turn the dough out onto a floured work surface. Knead lightly, using the heel of your hand to compress and push the dough away from you, and then fold it back over itself. Give the dough a small turn and repeat four or five times. (It's not yeast bread; you want to just barely activate the gluten, not overwork it.)

Using a lightly floured rolling pin, roll the dough out to a 9-inch square about ¾ inch thick. Using a chef's knife or a long utility knife, cut the biscuits into 1½-inch squares. (Don't drag the knife through the dough, but instead press the knife directly through the dough. This will help prevent pinched edges.)

Use an offset spatula or pancake turner to move the biscuits to the prepared baking sheet, keeping them close together. Brush with buttermilk and sprinkle with additional pepper.

Transfer the baking sheet to the oven and immediately reduce the oven temperature to 450°F. Bake, rotating the pan once, until nicely browned and the temperature registers 205°F, about 17 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack to cool slightly. Serve warm with sliced ham and jam, jelly, or preserves.

## BLACK PEPPER CREAM CHEESE BISCUITS

**Calories** 83kcal **Carbohydrates** 12g **Protein** 3g **Fat** 3g **Saturated Fat** 2g **Polyunsaturated Fat** 0.2g **Monounsaturated Fat** 1g **Trans Fat** 0.1g **Cholesterol** 8mg **Sodium** 218mg **Potassium** 41mg **Fiber** 0.4g **Sugar** 1g **Vitamin A** 90IU **Calcium** 70mg **Iron** 1mg



## BETTER-FOR-YOU BISCUITS

Makes 20 biscuits

These lightened up biscuits are made in the food processor! I've swapped out some of the all-purpose flour with whole wheat pastry flour to increase the nutritional value, used low-fat buttermilk, and best of all, backed off on some of the saturated fat by using a combination of butter and pure olive oil. Calorie-wise, butter and canola oil are about the same, but most of the fat in olive oil is unsaturated. I've created a better-for-you-biscuit. So, when you choose to enjoy a biscuit, I guarantee you're going to love this one.

**1¼ cups all-purpose flour, or cake flour (not self-rising), plus more for rolling out**

**¾ cup whole wheat pastry flour**

**1 tablespoon baking powder**

**¼ teaspoon baking soda**

**¾ teaspoon fine sea salt**

**2 tablespoons cold unsalted butter, cut into bits and chilled**

**¾ to 1 cup low-fat buttermilk**

**1 tablespoon pure olive oil**

**Turkey Sausage Gravy, for serving (optional; recipe follows)**

Preheat the oven to 500°F.

In the bowl of a food processor fitted with the blade attachment combine the all-purpose flour, whole wheat pastry flour, baking powder, baking soda, and salt. Pulse until combined. Add the butter to the flour and pulse until it resembles coarse meal. Combine the buttermilk and oil. Pour in the buttermilk mixture, and pulse again until just combined.

Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface. Knead lightly, using the heel of your hand to compress and push the dough away from you, and then fold it back over itself. Give the dough a small turn and repeat eight or so times. (It's not yeast bread; you want to just barely activate the gluten, not overwork it.)

Using a lightly floured rolling pin, roll the dough out ½ inch thick. Cut out rounds of dough with a 2-inch round cutter dipped in flour; press the cutter straight down without twisting so the biscuits will rise evenly when baked. Press the dough together and reroll. (Your first pass should yield about 12 biscuits.)

Place the biscuits on an ungreased baking sheet about 1 inch apart. Bake until golden brown, 10 to 15 minutes. Transfer to a rack to cool just slightly. Split and serve hot with Turkey Sausage Gravy.

### BETTER FOR YOU BISCUITS

**Calories** 65kcal **Carbohydrates** 10g **Protein** 1g **Fat** 2g **Saturated Fat** 1g **Polyunsaturated Fat** 0.2g **Monounsaturated Fat** 1g **Trans Fat** 0.05g **Cholesterol** 3mg **Sodium** 192mg **Potassium** 43mg **Fiber** 1g **Sugar** 1g **Vitamin A** 41IU **Vitamin C** 0.1mg **Calcium** 12mg **Iron** 1mg

# TURKEY SAUSAGE GRAVY

Makes 3⅔ cups

1 tablespoon pure olive oil

1 pound ground turkey  
sausage

Coarse kosher salt and  
freshly ground black pepper

1 sweet onion, finely  
chopped

¼ cup whole wheat pastry  
flour

2 cups 2 percent milk,  
warmed

1 teaspoon chopped fresh  
sage

Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the sausage and season with salt and pepper. Using a wooden spoon, break up the meat into small pieces. Pour off any excess rendered fat. Add the onion and cook until clear and translucent, 3 to 5 minutes. Add the flour and stir to combine and coat. Add the milk and season with salt and pepper. Bring to a boil then reduce heat to simmer. Let cook, stirring occasionally, until thick, about 5 minutes. Add the sage, taste, and adjust for seasoning with salt and pepper. Serve immediately.

## TURKEY SAUSAGE GRAVY (PER 3 TABLESPOON SERVING)

**Calories** 64kcal **Carbohydrates** 5g **Protein** 5g **Fat** 3g **Saturated Fat** 1g **Polyunsaturated Fat** 0.5g **Monounsaturated Fat** 1g **Trans Fat** 0.02g **Cholesterol** 14mg **Sodium** 229mg **Potassium** 103mg **Fiber** 1g **Sugar** 3g **Vitamin A** 57IU **Vitamin C** 8mg **Calcium** 38mg **Iron** 2mg



Food Processor bowl with flour pulsed with the butter to form coarse meal. (right)



# BISCUITS AND CHOCOLATE GRAVY

Makes 10 biscuits

These biscuits are based on Shirley Corriher's Touch of Grace biscuits. It's a very wet dough and produces a very cakey biscuit with a moist and airy crumb that literally melts in your mouth. It's perfect for the chocolate gravy.

Yes, chocolate gravy. It may sound like something out of Willy Wonka, but Biscuits and Chocolate Gravy is an old-school traditional recipe from the Upland South, in Appalachia.

## FOR THE BISCUITS

**3 cups all-purpose flour**

**1 tablespoon baking powder**

**1 teaspoon fine sea salt**

**4 tablespoons (½ stick) cold unsalted butter, cut into bits and chilled**

**¾ to 1 cup buttermilk**

## FOR THE GRAVY

**¾ cup sugar**

**3 tablespoons all-purpose flour**

**¼ cup dark cocoa powder**

**2 cups 2-percent or whole milk**

**1 tablespoon unsalted butter**

the saucepan from the heat and stir in the butter until it melts. Spoon warm gravy over the warm biscuits and serve the remaining gravy on the side.

**FOR THE BISCUITS** Heat the oven to 500 degrees F. Spray an 8-inch round cake pan with nonstick spray and set aside. In a bowl, combine 2 cups of the flour, the baking powder and salt. Using a pastry cutter or 2 knives, cut the butter into the flour mixture until it resembles coarse meal. Pour in the buttermilk and gently mix until just combined; use enough buttermilk so that the dough is very wet and looks like cottage cheese.

Place the remaining 1 cup flour in a shallow bowl. Spray a medium ice-cream scoop or tablespoon with nonstick spray. Scoop up some biscuit dough and drop it into the flour. Sprinkle flour over the top and roll the dough gently in the flour. Shake off excess flour and shape the dough into a round.

Place it in the prepared cake pan. Continue the process until all the dough is used, making 8 to 10 biscuits, and pressing them snugly next to each other in the pan. (This will keep them soft and tender.) Bake until golden brown, 12 to 15 minutes. Transfer the pan to a rack to cool just slightly.

**FOR THE CHOCOLATE GRAVY** Meanwhile, in a medium heavy saucepan, whisk together the sugar, flour and cocoa until no clumps of flour or cocoa remain. Whisk in the milk until well combined. Place over medium heat and cook, whisking constantly, until the mixture begins to boil and then thickens like gravy, 5 to 10 minutes. Remove

## BISCUITS AND CHOCOLATE GRAVY

**Calories** 293kcal **Carbohydrates** 50g **Protein** 7g **Fat** 8g **Saturated Fat** 5g **Polyunsaturated Fat** 0.5g **Monounsaturated Fat** 2g **Trans Fat** 0.3g **Cholesterol** 21mg **Sodium** 438mg **Potassium** 168mg **Fiber** 2g **Sugar** 18g **Vitamin A** 253IU **Vitamin C** 0.1mg **Calcium** 159mg **Iron** 2mg

# BROWN SUGAR STRAWBERRY SHORTCAKES

Makes 8 to 10 shortcakes

**3½ cups all purpose flour,  
plus more for dusting**

**½ cup granulated sugar**

**4 teaspoons baking powder**

**1 teaspoon fine sea salt**

**¾ cup (1½ sticks) unsalted  
butter, chilled and cut into  
small pieces**

**1 cup heavy cream, plus  
more for brushing**

**½ cup whole milk**

**Turbinado or raw brown  
sugar, for sprinkling**

**2 pints strawberries, hulled  
and sliced lengthwise**

**1 tablespoon granulated  
sugar, or to taste**

**Whipped cream, for  
accompaniment**

Heat the oven to 400°F. Line a baking sheet with a silicone baking sheet or parchment paper. To prepare the shortcakes, in the bowl of a heavy-duty mixer fitted with the paddle, combine the flour, granulated sugar, baking powder, and salt on low speed. Add the butter and mix on low until the mixture resembles coarse meal, about 2 minutes. Add the cream and milk and increase the speed to medium; mix until the dough comes together. Remove the dough to a lightly floured surface, lightly knead a few times, and shape into a rectangle about ¾-inch thick.

Cut out dough circles using a 3-inch round cutter. Place the circles on the prepared baking sheet. Brush the tops lightly with cream and sprinkle with the turbinado sugar. Bake until the shortcakes are golden brown, about 20 minutes. Transfer to a rack to cool.

Meanwhile, to prepare the berries, place the strawberries in a bowl. Add the granulated sugar. Set aside. To serve, halve the shortcakes horizontally with a serrated knife. Place the bottom halves on individual serving plates, top each with a dollop of whipped cream, then some berries. Cover with the tops of the shortcakes and serve. The shortcakes can be stored in an airtight container for up to 2 days.

## BROWN SUGAR STRAWBERRY SHORTCAKES

**Calories** 977kcal **Carbohydrates** 165g **Protein** 22g **Fat** 25g **Saturated Fat** 15g **Polyunsaturated Fat** 2g  
**Monounsaturated Fat** 6g **Trans Fat** 1g **Cholesterol** 65mg **Sodium** 528mg **Potassium** 398mg **Fiber** 7g **Sugar** 14g  
**Vitamin A** 806IU **Calcium** 173mg **Iron** 10mg





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