

Perfecting the flavor was, to me, a weighty issue, but an easy one to work through. Tasters moaned that orange zest makes cheesecake taste like a Creamsicle, so it was out of there in a New York minute. Next to go was lemon zest, because its flavor was equally distracting. A couple teaspoons of lemon juice, however, perked things up without adding a distinctively lemon flavor. Just a bit of salt (sodium is already part of cream cheese) and a couple teaspoons of vanilla extract rounded out the flavors. Thankfully, my tasters and I were on the same page: We all appreciated a minimalist cheesecake.

### Bake High and Low

One reason cheesecake is so loved by cooks is that it comes together easily. Even so, I noted that care must be used when mixing the ingredients, lest the batter end up with small nodules of unmixed cream cheese that mar the smoothness of the baked cake. Frequent and thorough scraping of the bowl during mixing is key to ensuring that every bit of cream cheese is incorporated. It's also helpful to start with semi-softened cream cheese. It doesn't need to be at room temperature, and it definitely doesn't need to be microwaved. Simply cutting the cream cheese into chunks and letting it stand while preparing the crust and assembling the other ingredients—30 to 45 minutes—makes mixing easier. (When icebox-cold, the cream cheese resists being mixed. It clings to the beaters and bowl in firm, waxy chunks and requires much scraping and beating before it will cooperate.)

There are many ways to bake a cheesecake—in a moderate oven, in a low oven, in a water bath, or in the New York fashion, in which the cake bakes at 500 degrees for about 10 minutes and then at 200 degrees for about an hour. I tried them all, but the New York method was the only one that yielded the attractive nut-brown surface I was after. This super-simple, no-water-bath (no leaking pans, layers of foil prophylactics, or boiling water), dual-temperature baking method also produced a lovely graded texture—soft and creamy at the center and firm and dry at the periphery.

The New York baking method was not without flaws, however. After an hour at 200 degrees, the very center of the cheesecake—even after chilling—was loose and slippy, the result of underbaking. Some recipes leave the cheesecake in the still-warm, turned-off, propped-open oven for about 30 minutes to finish setting up. When I tried this, the cheesecake was marginally better but still insufficiently baked.

Next, I extended the hour-long oven time to 90 minutes, baking the cheesecake to an internal temperature of about 150 degrees. Once chilled, it was cheesecake perfection. With a cleanly set center rather than a wet and sloppy one, it sliced into neat slabs. And though each slice kept its shape, every bite was satiny on the tongue. Because all ovens bake differently, it's important to guard against overbaking the cheesecake. Taken to internal temperatures of more than 160 degrees, my test cheesecakes were

hopelessly cracked (see “The Conundrum of the Crack” below). To avoid this problem, I used an instant-read thermometer. It is the most reliable means of judging the doneness of the cheesecake.

Cheesecake is also well loved (by the sweet tooth, not the waistline) because it lasts longer in the refrigerator than a dessert should. After a day or two, the crust is a little soggy, but the cake tastes every bit as good.

### NEW YORK-STYLE CHEESECAKE

MAKES ONE 9-INCH CHEESECAKE, SERVING 12 TO 16

**NOTE:** For the crust, chocolate wafers (Nabisco Famous) can be substituted for graham crackers; you will need about 14 wafers. The flavor and texture of the cheesecake is best if the cake is allowed to stand at room temperature for 30 minutes before serving. When cutting the cake, have a pitcher of hot tap water nearby; dipping the blade of the knife into the water and wiping it clean with a kitchen towel after each cut helps make neat slices.

#### Graham Cracker Crust

- 1 cup (4 ounces) graham cracker crumbs (8 whole crackers, broken into rough pieces and processed in food processor until fine) (see note)
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 5 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted, plus 1 tablespoon melted butter for greasing pan

#### Cheesecake Filling

- 2½ pounds cream cheese, cut into rough 1-inch chunks and left to stand at room temperature for 30 to 45 minutes
- ⅛ teaspoon table salt
- 1½ cups (10½ ounces) sugar
- ⅓ cup (2½ ounces) sour cream
- 2 teaspoons juice from 1 lemon
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 2 large egg yolks plus 6 large whole eggs

1. **FOR THE CRUST:** Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Combine graham cracker crumbs and sugar in medium bowl; add 5 tablespoons melted butter and toss with fork until evenly moistened. Brush bottom and sides of 9-inch springform pan with most of remaining melted butter, making sure to leave enough to brush pan in step 3. Empty crumbs into springform pan and press evenly into pan bottom. Bake until fragrant and beginning to brown around edges, about 13 minutes. Cool on wire rack while making filling.

2. **FOR THE CHEESECAKE FILLING:** Increase oven temperature to 500 degrees. In stand mixer fitted with paddle attachment, beat cream cheese at medium-low speed to break up and soften slightly, about 1 minute. Scrape beater and bottom and sides of bowl well with rubber spatula; add salt and about half of sugar and beat at medium-low speed until combined, about 1 minute. Scrape bowl;

beat in remaining sugar until combined, about 1 minute. Scrape bowl; add sour cream, lemon juice, and vanilla and beat at low speed until combined, about 1 minute. Scrape bowl; add yolks and beat at medium-low speed until thoroughly combined, about 1 minute. Scrape bowl; add whole eggs 2 at a time, beating until thoroughly combined, about 1 minute, and scraping bowl between additions.

3. Brush sides of springform pan with remaining melted butter. Set springform pan on rimmed baking sheet (to catch any spills if pan leaks). Pour filling into cooled crust and bake 10 minutes; without opening oven door, reduce oven temperature to 200 degrees and continue to bake until instant-read thermometer inserted into center of cheesecake registers about 150 degrees, about 1½ hours. Transfer cake to wire rack and cool 5 minutes; run paring knife between cake and side of springform pan. Cool until barely warm, 2½ to 3 hours. Wrap tightly in plastic wrap and refrigerate until cold, at least 3 hours. (Cake can be refrigerated up to 4 days.)

4. To unmold cheesecake, remove sides of pan. Slide thin metal spatula between crust and pan bottom to loosen, then slide cake onto serving plate. Let cheesecake stand at room temperature about 30 minutes, then cut into wedges and serve.

### SCIENCE

#### The Conundrum of the Crack

Some cooks use the crack to gauge when a cheesecake is done. I say if it's cracked, it's overdone, not to mention unsightly. Exactly what happens, you may ask, that causes the cheesecake to form a fault line?

I learned from two months of baking that when the internal temperature of a cheesecake rises beyond 160 degrees, it almost always cracks. The best way to prevent cheesecake from cracking is to use an instant-read thermometer to test its doneness. Take it out of the oven when it reaches 150 degrees at the center to avoid overbaking.

That said, there is a second opportunity for the cheesecake to crack, this time outside of the oven. During my testing, a perfectly good-looking cake cracked as it sat on the cooling rack—the cake shrank during cooling and clung to the sides of the springform pan. If the cake clings tenaciously enough, it splits at its weakest point: the center. To avoid this type of late cracking, cool the cheesecake for only a few minutes, then free it from the sides of the pan with a paring knife before allowing it to cool fully. —D.Y.



#### NO MORE CRACKS

To prevent cracks, remove the cheesecake from the oven when it reaches 150 degrees.

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