

The solar bakery— quickbreads and cakes

By Jennifer Stein Barker

I have been cooking with the sun for five years now, and find it a wonderful way to take advantage of summer's delightful weather and spend more time outside. My favorite recipes are those which I can toss together and place in the solar cooker, then run off to the garden (perhaps with a timer clipped to my pocket) and work until it's time to check my bread or cake. In winter, I cook on a woodstove, so summer brings a taste of freedom with no fire to build or fuel to consider.

It's nice to have snacking foods and lunchbox goodies always handy for hungry homestead workers. I like my family's snacks to be nutritious and substantial. That way, they do double duty as "real food." Having nutritious

snacks available for midmorning and afternoon helps people avoid overeating at regular mealtimes.

Quickbreads and cakes are wonderful ways to take advantage of carefree solar cookery. Multi-reflector commercial cookers like the Solar Chef and Sun Oven, or homemade SunStar cardboard box cookers, will work best for baking because they approximate the temperatures and baking times of conventional ovens. Of course, the sunnier the day and the better your oven's focus on the sun, the better results you will have.

Quickbreads and cakes do not have very much water mass in them and they will come up to baking temperature quickly. You must put them in a preheated cooker because rising dough must be cooked or it will fall again. Watch your preheating of the

cooker carefully, because an empty solar cooker will quickly get hot enough to smoke the finish off the inside. It is the mass of food inside which controls the temperature. A small jar of water will be enough to moderate the temperature in a preheating oven. A rock or brick placed to heat in the empty cooker will provide mass to help hold the heat whenever you open the door to put food in and it will help provide bottom heat to your baked goods.

Keep track of the temperature in your solar cooker. Put an oven thermometer inside it where you can see it without opening the door. Preheat the cooker to 300-400 degrees F. Being precise isn't necessary because as soon as you put your loaf or cake in the oven, the temperature will fall to 300 degrees or less. Don't worry;

Buttermilk spice cake

I have a friend who used to bring a piece of this cake in every single one of his sack lunches, and I just had to ask for the recipe. Of course, it's a little different now...

Makes an 8X8-inch cake of 12 pieces:

1 ¼ cups whole wheat
pastry flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon cinnamon
½ teaspoon allspice

¼ teaspoon grated nutmeg
¼ cup buttermilk powder
⅓ cup oil
½ cup honey
1 egg

¾ cup boiling water
⅓ cup coarsely chopped
walnuts

Preheat the solar cooker with 1 cup of water in it. Bring the water to a boil, and have ready for the recipe. Lightly oil an 8X8-inch square cake pan, and line it with bakers paper if you wish.

Sift together the flour, soda, baking powder, cinnamon, allspice, nutmeg, and buttermilk powder. Put the mixture back into the sifter and set aside. In a medium bowl, beat together the oil, honey and egg until very frothy. Sift in the flour mixture in 4 installments, beating well after each (if you are using a hand rotary beater, you may have to stir the last one in with a spoon). Add the boiling water and beat for 1 minute. Fold in the chopped nuts, and pour the mixture into the prepared pan.

Bake until the cake tests done. Remove the cake whole (if you have used the paper), or cool in the pan 10 minutes, then cut into 12 pieces and remove to a rack to cool. Cool thoroughly before storing in an airtight container in a cool place.

Conventional kitchen instructions: Bake in a preheated 350-degree oven for 40 to 45 minutes.

Rhubarb buttermilk cake

Rhubarb needs no added moisture to make a cake, so to get great flavor, I use powdered buttermilk (available at health food stores or in the powdered milk section of the grocery).

Makes one 8X8-inch cake of 16 pieces:

1/3 cup finely chopped walnuts
1 1/3 cups whole wheat
pastry flour
1/2 teaspoon baking soda

1/4 cup buttermilk powder
3 cups diced rhubarb
1 egg
1 tablespoon oil

1/3 cup honey
1 teaspoon vanilla

Preheat the solar cooker and lightly oil an 8X8-inch square cake pan. Sprinkle about half the chopped nuts over the bottom of the pan, and set aside.

Measure the flour, baking soda and buttermilk powder into a medium bowl. Stir until well blended. Dice the rhubarb 1/4 to 1/2-inch (to your taste, it does not need to be perfectly regular). Toss the rhubarb with the dry ingredients and set aside.

Measure 1/3 cup honey, and add the oil, egg and vanilla to it right in the measuring cup. Stir together well, then scrape it out over the rhubarb mixture. Toss and stir until ingredients are thoroughly moistened. The mixture will be stiff.

Spoon the mixture into the pan, being careful to distribute evenly over the nuts without disturbing them. Push down and smooth over the top. Sprinkle the remaining nuts over the top, and bake in solar cooker until the cake tests done.

Let rest in the pan 10 minutes to cool, then slice into 16 pieces and remove the pieces to a rack with a spatula. Serve warm, or let cool thoroughly and then store in an airtight container. This resists becoming soggy, but it is best eaten the first or second day (refrigerate after the first day).

Conventional kitchen instructions: Bake in a preheated 350-degree oven for 35 to 40 minutes, until the cake tests done.

quickbreads and cakes will cook just fine. Turn the cooker as frequently as you can to focus on the sun. Cooking time may only be about 15 to 20 percent longer than in a conventional oven. When your bread or cake looks done, open the cooker and check it. If it isn't quite, then five minutes more will usually do the job.

Solar cookers have a limit to how much food can be put in them at once and still bake properly. This varies with the size and design of the cooker. Two loaves of bread are too much for most cookers. One standard loaf will usually do just fine, and remember: even if the sun goes behind a cloud, and your loaf turns out flat-topped, it will still taste just as good.

I use dark-coated tin pans for baking breads and cakes. If the pan doesn't fit in your cooker one way, turn it a quarter-turn and try it another way. Make sure the pan fits and the cooker is set up for it before getting the cooker preheated and the dough or batter in the pan. Your granite-ware may also be used as a baking pan. Δ

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Fresh apple bread

This sweet and tender quickbread goes wonderfully in a lunchbox. Use all-purpose whole wheat flour, or a 50-50 blend of bread and pastry flour. If you prefer muffins, this recipe will make a dozen regular muffins.

Makes a 5X9-inch loaf:

2 cups whole wheat flour (see above)	1 teaspoon cinnamon	½ cup honey
1 teaspoon baking powder	1½ cups finely chopped apple	1 egg
1 teaspoon baking soda	½ cup chopped walnuts	½ cup milk
	¼ cup oil	

Set your solar cooker out to preheat. Prepare a 5X9-inch loaf pan by oiling it lightly.

Sift the flour, baking powder, soda and cinnamon together into a medium bowl. Add the chopped apples and nuts, and toss to coat. In a small bowl, whisk together the oil, honey, egg and milk. Add the wet ingredients to the dry and stir just until all ingredients are moistened. Do not worry about any small lumps.

Bake in the solar cooker until the loaf is golden on top and tests done. Cool 10 minutes in the pan before removing to a rack to finish cooling. This loaf is best stored in the refrigerator, because of the moistness of the apples.

Conventional kitchen instructions: Bake in a preheated 350-degree oven for 50 to 60 minutes, or until the loaf tests done. If the top browns too quickly, put a foil cap over the loaf or put a cookie sheet on the shelf above it.

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