

5 Smart Ways to Bake Better Bar Cookies

Easier to prepare and bake than regular cookies, bars are simple, versatile treats that can be filled with nutrient-rich ingredients like whole grains, fruit, nuts, and seeds. Bars are often served from the pan - making them the perfect holiday hostess gift or buffet contribution. For bars that are pretty enough to give as gifts, use a sharp chef's knife to trim away any dry outer edges and cut bars to medium-size pieces.

1. Use the right sized pan.

When baking bar cookies, pay close attention to the size of the pan specified in the recipe. Using the wrong size pan changes the depth of the batter, which affects both cooking times and the texture of the bars. A pan that is too large can lead to dry, thin bars, while one that is too small can result in bars that are gummy in the center and more cakey than desired.

2. Prepare the pan properly.

For best results, use nonstick vegetable spray or solid shortening to grease baking pans or sheets. Salted butter may cause bars to stick or to get overly brown on the bottom. You can also line the pan with aluminum foil or parchment paper to insure easy removal. Most wrapped bars can be stored at room temperature for 3-4 days or frozen for several weeks.

3. Use the right kind of oil.

Always follow recipe directions for the type of oil (liquid oil, butter, solid shortening, or margarine) to be used. While regular butter and margarine can usually be substituted for one another, never use any product labeled as whipped, diet, or spread in making bar cookies. These products contain extra water and air, which can result in gooey textures.

4. Do not over-mix the dough.

As with quick breads and other cookie dough, it is important to prevent the gluten in the flour from developing too much. Thoroughly mix wet and dry ingredients (including the flour) separately. Once the two have been combined, stir only enough to moisten the dry ingredients. Too much mixing develops more gluten and leads to tough textures.

5. Monitor cooking times carefully.

Ideally, bake one pan of bar cookies at a time, placing the pan on a rack in the center of the oven. If using a glass or dark pan, reduce oven temperature by 25 degrees F. Check bars at least 5 minutes before the minimum baking time suggested in the recipe. Bars are done when a wooden pick inserted in the center comes out clean.