

Ultimate Banana Bread

Any 10-year-old can make the typical dry, bland banana bread. But if you want to make a moist, tender loaf with over-the-top banana flavor, you need to think like a mad scientist.

BY ANDREA GEARY

The tradition of baking banana bread is more heavily steeped in parsimony than in indulgence: When bananas get covered with brownish-black spots, the frugal alternative to pitching them in the trash has always been to mash them up, add them to a quick-bread batter, and bake.

I'm all for thrift in the kitchen, but I've yet to come across a banana bread recipe that actually makes me glad I saved those overripe specimens. Depending on the fat-to-flour ratio—and just how spotty those bananas really were—the crumb varies from cottony and tough to dense and damp, with a typically overbaked ring crusting over the exterior. Even more discouraging, all that ripe banana flavor somehow seems to vaporize during baking, leaving me with a ho-hum loaf that just begs for the added oomph of chocolate chips, coconut, rum, or gobs of cream cheese slathered on top. Without upsetting the humble charms of this bread, what would it take to create a moist, tender loaf that really tasted like bananas?



Even though it's chock-full of bananas, our loaf boasts a tender (not wet) texture.

Concentration Consternation

Just to reacquaint myself with the core problems, I cherry-picked a few promising-looking recipes to make in the test kitchen, most of which followed a formula along these lines: Combine mashed, ripe bananas with vegetable oil, eggs, and sugar; fold that into a dry mix of flour, baking soda, and salt; and scrape the batter into a loaf pan before popping it into a 350-degree oven for about an hour. I suppose the breads were passable as PTA-meeting handouts—sweet-smelling and pleasant enough to eat when they were warm and fresh—but their banana flavor was utterly forgettable.

Except for one loaf, that is. With a stature that was a good half inch shorter than the other breads and an interior crumb that could only be described as wet, it wasn't much to look at. (One taster actually used the word "sludgy.") But it took only a couple of bites before my colleagues and I were returning for seconds, declaring that this loaf had unprecedented true fruit flavor. Why the drastic difference? Simple: This recipe called for roughly the same amount of flour, sugar, fat, and eggs as all the others but twice the number of bananas—six instead of the usual three. Their effect was both a blessing and a curse:

Doubling the bananas may have doubled the flavor, but it also oversaturated the batter. My task was clear: figure out how to cram as many bananas as possible into the loaf without sinking its cakelike structure.

Since it was obvious that simply mashing up more bananas to add to the batter compromised the crumb, I decided to limit myself to three pieces and try alternative avenues to ratcheting up the flavor. A few of the more inventive recipes I came across required stirring crushed banana chips into the batter; presumably, the chips' toasty, concentrated flavor would pick up where the fresh fruit left off. Wrong: The loaf I made with $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of ground banana chips had no more flavor than previous batches—in fact, it was even a bit drier. Turns out banana chips are made from underripe bananas (because they withstand processing better than ripe fruit), and underripe bananas are largely composed of moisture-absorbing starch. Scratch that off the list.

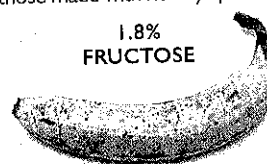
If banana chips were too dehydrated, maybe the answer to bigger banana flavor was to start at the source—actual ripe bananas—and drain their liquid. That way, I'd get all the benefits of the fruit's creamy sweetness and be able to control the moisture level. Flipping through the test kitchen archives for ideas, I came across a recipe for low-fat banana bread, in which we discovered that roasting the fruit not only helped some of the excess moisture evaporate but also concentrated its rich brown sugar notes. My goal was to remove enough moisture so that two more bananas (for a total of five) wouldn't overwhelm the batter. Unsure how much moisture would escape through the skin, I roasted batches of bananas three different ways—peels intact, peels split, and peels removed—and then incorporated them into the batter. No matter what the roasting method, five bananas still produced an unacceptably wet loaf, so I scaled back to four bananas. This time around, the split-peel loaf stood out for its nice, moist (but not puddinglike) crumb and a fruity flavor that was a significant step up from any three-banana loaf I'd made. But roasting tacked on 45 minutes to the recipe. And were four bananas really as high as I could go?

Liquid Asset

My patience with this process was growing thin. Then a thrifty colleague mentioned that in lieu of throwing out bananas too ripe to eat, she saves

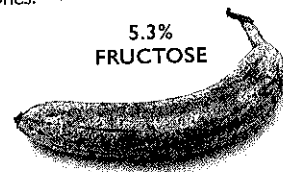
SCIENCE Do the Ripe Thing

Don't even think about making banana bread with anything less than very ripe, heavily speckled fruit—unless you're fine with a bland loaf. As bananas ripen, their starch converts into sugar at an exponential rate. In lab tests, we found that heavily speckled bananas had nearly three times the amount of fructose (the sweetest of the sugars in fruit) of less spotty bananas. (The exact percentage will vary from fruit to fruit.) But the impact of ripeness goes only so far: We found little difference in sweetness between loaves baked with completely black bananas and those made with heavily speckled ones.



1.8% FRUCTOSE

TOO SOON
A lightly speckled banana has only a little fructose, the sweetest sugar in fruit.



5.3% FRUCTOSE

JUST RIGHT
A heavily speckled banana has a lot more fructose.

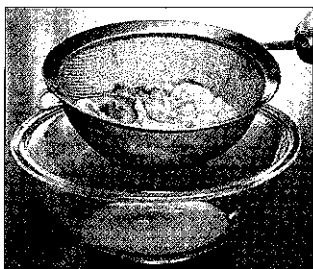
KEY STEPS | WHO KNEW? BANANAS HAVE JUICE

Typical banana bread contains just three pieces of fruit. Here's how we upped the number to five without turning the loaf into pudding.



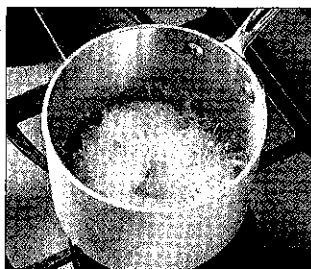
EXTRACT THE JUICE

Microwaving the ripe bananas for five minutes causes them to release their "juice."



STRAIN IT OUT

Passing the banana pulp through a fine-mesh strainer results in $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of juice to work with.



REDUCE THE JUICE

Reducing the banana juice on the stovetop intensifies flavor without making the loaf overly wet.

them in the freezer, though she has seen them exude quite a lot of liquid when thawed. Armed with this promising nugget, I thawed some very ripe bananas I had stored in the freezer; sure enough, five of them yielded around $\frac{2}{3}$ cup of liquid. I pureed the fruit, added it to my bread, and was rewarded with a flavor-packed loaf boasting a moist, fully baked crumb. My enthusiasm was renewed—until I realized that this discovery would be moot if I had no frozen ripe bananas at the ready.

I had no choice but to return to trying to cook off extra moisture. This time around, I moved my efforts out of the oven and onto the stove: I tried simmering the mashed bananas as well as dicing and sautéing them—but the direct heat in both attempts gave the fruit an overcooked, jam-like flavor. I was stumped until I remembered a solution for removing moisture from waterlogged eggplant: microwaving it. I placed five bananas in a glass bowl and zapped them on high power for about five minutes and then transferred the now-pulpy fruit to a sieve to drain. Bingo! This caused them to release as much liquid as the thawed frozen bananas. Furthermore, since the bananas were heated for only a short time, they didn't take on the overly cooked flavor of the simmered puree or sautéed bananas.

But what to do about the banana liquid I'd collected? I couldn't bear the thought of pouring all that sweet flavor down the drain. (In cooking terms, it seemed as blasphemous as throwing away the fond.) I transferred this liquid to a saucepan, cooked it down to 2 ounces, and then added it back to the mashed bananas (along with another $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of flour to compensate for the extra liquid). As crazy as it sounded to extract banana liquid only to put it back (albeit in concentrated form), the result was a revelation. This step not only infused the bread with ripe, intensely fruity banana flavor but also eased my frugal Yankee conscience. What's more, the extra moisture in the batter helped create a crumb that was tender through and through, without being framed by overly crusty sides.

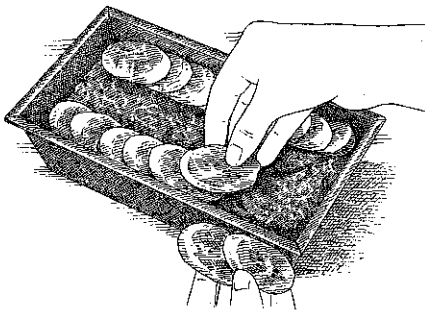
The Sixth Sense

With the flavor problem solved, a few minor tweaks completed the recipe: I exchanged the granulated sugar for light brown sugar, finding that the latter's molasses notes better complemented the bananas. A teaspoon of vanilla rounded out the bananas' faintly boozy, rumlike flavor, as did swapping out the oil for the nutty richness of butter. I also added $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of toasted walnuts to the batter, finding that their crunch provided a pleasing contrast to the rich, moist crumb.

This banana bread was a true showpiece, from its deep golden crust all the way through to the center's velvety crumb, yet lingering in the back of my mind was the urge to actually double the number of bananas in the conventional recipe. Wondering if the crust might benefit from a little embellishment, I sliced a sixth banana and shingled it on top of the batter. A final sprinkle of sugar helped the buttery slices caramelize and gave the loaf an enticingly crisp, crunchy top. In fact, I started craving thick slices of this bread so often, I now make a point of always having a bunch of ripe bananas waiting in the wings.

TECHNIQUE

SHINGLE YOUR LOAF



Layering thin banana slices on either side of the loaf adds even more banana flavor to our bread (and brings the total number of bananas in the recipe to six). To ensure an even rise, leave a $1\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-wide space down the center.

ULTIMATE BANANA BREAD

SERVES 10

Be sure to use very ripe, heavily speckled (or even black) bananas in this recipe; using bananas that are less ripe will result in bland banana bread. This recipe can be made using five thawed frozen bananas; since thawed frozen bananas release a large amount of liquid naturally, they can bypass the five or so minutes of microwaving in step 2 and go directly into the fine-mesh strainer. Do not use a thawed frozen banana in step 4; it will be too soft to slice. Instead, if you don't have a large very ripe banana on hand, skip adding the banana slices and simply sprinkle the top of the banana bread with sugar. The test kitchen's preferred loaf pan measures $8\frac{1}{2}$ by $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches; if you use a 9 by 5-inch loaf pan, start checking for doneness five minutes earlier than advised in the recipe. The texture of this banana bread is best when the loaf is eaten fresh, but it can be stored (let the loaf cool completely first), covered tightly with plastic wrap, for up to three days.

- $1\frac{3}{4}$ cups ($8\frac{3}{4}$ ounces) all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- 6 large very ripe bananas ($2\frac{1}{4}$ pounds), peeled
- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and cooled
- 2 large eggs
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup packed ($5\frac{1}{4}$ ounces) light brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup walnuts, toasted and chopped coarse (optional)
- 2 teaspoons granulated sugar

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Spray $8\frac{1}{2}$ by $4\frac{1}{2}$ -inch loaf pan with vegetable oil spray. Whisk flour, baking soda, and salt together in large bowl.

2. Place 5 bananas in separate bowl, cover, and microwave until bananas are soft and have released liquid, about 5 minutes. Transfer bananas to fine-mesh strainer over medium bowl and allow to drain, stirring occasionally, for 15 minutes (you should have $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ cup liquid).

3. Transfer liquid to medium saucepan and cook over medium-high heat until reduced to $\frac{1}{4}$ cup, about 5 minutes. Remove pan from heat, stir bananas into reduced liquid, and mash with potato masher until mostly smooth. Whisk in butter, eggs, brown sugar, and vanilla.

4. Pour banana mixture into dry ingredients and stir until just combined, with some streaks of flour remaining. Gently fold in walnuts, if using. Scrape batter into prepared pan. Slice remaining 1 banana diagonally into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-thick slices. Shingle banana slices on top of loaf in 2 rows, leaving $1\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-wide space down center to ensure even rise. Sprinkle granulated sugar evenly over loaf.

5. Bake until toothpick inserted in center of loaf comes out clean, 55 to 75 minutes. Let loaf cool in pan for 10 minutes, then turn out onto wire rack and let cool for 1 hour before serving.