

The holidays are upon us, and even we dyed-in-the-wool “I never cook” types will probably find ourselves forced to the kitchen in conjunction with some type of entertaining.

Of course this is all well and good for people who DO cook and who know their way around a spatula. They say every cook has an acquired set of kitchen wisdom that’s never been written down, but are just things that “everyone knows”... well, everyone who COOKS, maybe!

So for those of us who are not as agile in the kitchen as we are in the gym, here are some tips for dealing with common cooking challenges. Thanks to the experts at Real Simple magazine, some holiday kitchen tips for faking it with common culinary questions will help us all chill out and enjoy the holidays.

Q: How can I make fluffier cookies? Mine are flatter than Jami’s abs...

A: Remember that butter makes the dough thinner, because it has water in it. Some bakers use shortening (like Crisco) for taller cookies, but taste will suffer. One trick for making all-butter cookies fluffy is adding a little elbow grease: beat the butter and sugar mixture for five minutes, instead of two, to whip in more air.

Q: How about using alcohol in recipes? Does it burn off?

A: The room won’t spin after you eat one piece of rum cake, but there is still some alcohol in it. Alcohol has a lower boiling point than water, which is why people think it disappears in sauces and baked goods. But when you simmer a sauce

containing wine or liquor, up to 50 percent of the alcohol can remain, says Robert Wolke, professor emeritus of chemistry at the University of Pittsburgh and the author of *What Einstein Told His Cook* (www.amazon.com, \$26). The percentage depends on how long it simmers and other factors, like the size of the pan. When you’re baking a cake,

the evaporated alcohol has to work its way out of the batter, so even less will “burn off” than in an open pan.

Q: Can I substitute baking soda for baking powder? How long do they last?

A: Baking soda will live to see your four-year-old get married. Baking powder has a shelf life of about a year. What’s the difference? Both are leavening agents, but baking powder contains an acid that allows it to react in recipes as soon as it gets wet, giving off the carbon dioxide that makes a cake rise. Baking soda has no acid; it relies on acids in the batter to activate it. If baking powder gets wet or is stored in a humid environment (like the fridge), its potency is diminished. To find out if your baking powder is still good, put some in a glass of water. If it bubbles, bake away. If not, head to the store.

Q: Does butter spoil if left out on the counter?

A. Butter does spoil, but much more slowly than fresh milk products, because most butter contains added salt that slows bacteria growth. Today’s salted butter, in normal usage, will rarely spoil, even if you leave it unrefrigerated all the time. Unsalted butter might spoil in about a week, but it contains enough natural salt to slow the growth of bacteria that cause spoiling. So you don’t have to worry if you forget to put the butter away after dinner (although you might tempt curious critters).

Q: Is decaffeinated coffee totally caffeine-free?

A: Nope. Between 97 and 99 percent of the caffeine is eliminated during the decaffeinating process. Coffee purists recommend the Swiss Water Process, in which the beans are steamed, then soaked in hot water until their chemical structure swells, at which point a carbon filter draws out the caffeine. But some caffeine remains after the beans are dried and roasted. But experts say it’s not enough to keep you awake at night unless you drink six or more cups of it.

Special holiday treat: Boozy Berries

All too often, those on-sale winter strawberries look festive but have no taste. (Remember, any trace of white near a strawberry’s stems means they were picked too early.) Try sprinkling sliced berries with sugar, and adding a touch of vanilla extract, a few drops of lemon juice and a pinch of ground cinnamon or cardamon. Just before serving, splash on some light fruity red wine, like a Beaujolais.



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