



# Dream Muffins

How to make your favorite bakery treat healthier.

BY ELLIE KRIEGER

WITH HOPE IN MY HEART, I bought another “healthy” (read: low-fat) muffin the other day. Like a girl who keeps going for the wrong guy, I should have known better. It was predictably disappointing—overly sweet and rubbery, with the texture of paper pulp. I tossed it after two bites.

Sure, I could have gone for the regular muffin, and I do now and then. But let’s face it, those are really just cake in a muffin tin—loaded with butter, sugar, and white flour, and coming in at (gulp!) more than 500 calories each. Not something I consider an everyday food. It seems that there are two kinds of muffins in the world: either delicious and not so healthful, or healthful and not so delicious. But wouldn’t it be great if there were a tender, moist, utterly scrumptious muffin that was also light and chock full of wholesomeness?

I have good news for you: With a few simple tweaks to the standard recipe, I was able to make my dream muffin a reality. And what’s even better is that those tweaks can be applied to other baked goods, so you can have your cake and eat it, too.

## The secret ingredient

Fruit purées like applesauce or mashed banana (or even vegetable purées made from pumpkin, carrots, and sweet potatoes) make muffins and other baked goods tender and moist while allowing you to reduce the overall fat and sugar in the recipe. Normally it’s fat that helps baked goods stay moist, because it surrounds the starch granules and protects them from gluten development, locking in moisture. But the pectin in fruit and vegetables does essentially the same thing, making it possible to cut back on the fat in a recipe without sacrificing moisture. Fruit purées also provide sweetness, so you can add less sugar to your batter.

In the muffin recipe opposite, I was able to cut the fat by half (there’s just a quarter-cup of heart-healthy oil in this whole batch

of muffins, and no butter) and reduce the sugar by a few tablespoons without compromising flavor and texture. I particularly like applesauce, which I use here, because it has a neutral flavor and color, so it’s perfect when you want the purée to be essentially undetectable.

## Liquid asset

A fast track for making baked goods healthier is to use oil instead of butter, lard, or shortening. That’s because oil is unsaturated fat (“good fat”), while butter, lard, and shortening are mostly saturated fats (“bad fat”). For muffins, quick breads, coffee cakes, and even pancakes, trading all the solid fat for oil works perfectly. Pastries, piecrusts, and cookies, however, need butter to get the right texture, so it’s best to leave those recipes alone. I like to use canola oil for its mild flavor, but if the treat has a Mediterranean flair, then a fruity olive oil works well.

## Flour equation

I want my baked goods to be healthy, but I don’t want them to *taste* healthy. By using half whole-wheat flour and half all-purpose, I get the antioxidants, fiber, and essential minerals of the whole grain, but I also hold onto the tender lightness produced by white flour. As you’ll see, the proof is in these muffins, which are golden, moist, and cakey, with just the right touch of sweetness—they’re a dream come true.



*“I want my baked goods to be healthy, but I don’t want them to taste healthy,” says Ellie.*



## good-for-you blueberry muffins

These muffins are at their tastiest while still warm from the oven.

**Yields 12 muffins**

- Nonstick cooking spray
- 4½ oz. (1 cup) unbleached all-purpose flour
- 4 oz. (1 cup) whole-wheat flour
- 2 tsp. baking powder
- ½ tsp. table salt
- ¼ tsp. baking soda
- 2 large eggs
- ¾ cup granulated sugar
- ¼ cup canola oil
- 1 cup natural unsweetened applesauce
- 1½ tsp. finely grated lemon zest
- 1 tsp. pure vanilla extract
- ¾ cup low-fat buttermilk
- 1½ cups fresh blueberries

**Position a rack** in the center of the oven and heat the oven to 400°F. Coat a 12-cup standard muffin pan with cooking spray.

**In a medium bowl**, whisk both flours, the baking powder, salt, and baking soda.

**In a large bowl**, whisk the eggs, sugar, and oil until the mixture is pale and slightly frothy. Whisk in the applesauce, lemon zest, and vanilla. With the whisk, stir in about half the flour mixture, then half the buttermilk. Repeat with the remaining flour and then the remaining buttermilk, stirring until well incorporated. Gently fold in the blueberries.

**Divide the batter** among the muffin cups, filling them to the top. Tap the pan on the counter to remove any air bubbles. Bake until a toothpick inserted in the center of one of the muffins comes out clean, 20 to 30 minutes.

**Let cool** on a wire rack for 15 minutes. Run a knife around the muffins to loosen them and then unmold. Serve warm or let cool completely and store in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 3 days, or wrap individually and freeze for up to 3 months.

*Registered dietitian Ellie Krieger is a Fine Cooking contributing editor.*

## Good to Know

Use these guidelines to make some of your favorite sweets more healthful.

**1. Use fruit purée to cut down on fat and sugar.** Purées work best in recipes that already have a fruit or vegetable element, like banana bread, carrot cake, and the blueberry muffins here. Try substituting 1 cup purée for ¼ cup of the butter or oil in your recipe; taking the sugar down by 1 or 2 Tbs.,

depending on the sweetness of the purée; and reducing the liquid by ¼ cup.

**2. Swap solid fat with liquid fat.** In other words, instead of butter or shortening, use oil. If a recipe calls for ¼ cup butter, use ¼ cup oil instead. This works best for moist sweets like muffins, quick breads,

coffee cakes, and pancakes, where you can substitute all of the solid fat with oil.

**3. Use half whole-wheat and half all-purpose flour.** To make just about any sweet treat healthier, substitute half the total amount of all-purpose flour with an equal amount of whole-wheat.