



Basic Sponge

People quite often ask when I decided to become a chef. For me I think it was a natural digression. My Mother and Grandmother were both fantastic cooks, notorious for their baking skills, and being the youngest child I found myself growing up on their apron strings. Food is tremendously nostalgic and this recipe conjures up memories of being presented the wooden spoon and near empty mixing bowl to scrape and devour as a treat or reward to enjoy, while patiently sitting cross legged on the kitchen floor, watching through the oven door as the sponge would start to magically rise and colour. Still to this day I find it hard to resist running my finger round the bowl!

Like most recipes we do at the cook school, I always describe this as a “base recipe” and it is perfect for making cupcakes, Victoria Sponge, Swiss rolls or birthday cakes. With the addition of 75g of coco powder to the recipe we have chocolate cake, or maybe a table spoon of instant coffee granules for a coffee flavoured sponge, or simply the zest of an orange, lime or lemon for some thing different, but I always insist with a little imagination and experimentation we can probably do 100 different things with this recipe.

For this example I’m going to keep it simple and make a Victoria sponge. I always find I get the best results when I use 2x 8 inch (20 cm) diameter sponge tins, 1½ inches (4 cm) deep but you can vary the size and shape of the tins as desired.

To start we need:-

- 175g self raising flour
- 1 tea spoon baking powder
- 175g castor sugar
- 3 medium free range eggs (at room temperature)
- 175g unsalted butter plus extra for greasing the sponge tins (softened at room temperature)
- ½ tea spoon vanilla extract or the seeds of one vanilla pod
- Strawberry jam
- 400ml double cream, whipped until soft peaks
- Icing sugar to dust

Pre-heat a fan assisted oven to 170oC or gas mark 3. Lightly grease the 2 sponge tins and line each base with a circle of silicone paper (baking parchment), which should also be lightly greased.

Start by sieving the self raising flour and baking powder together into a mixing bowl from a height.

Add the softened butter, sugar and vanilla extract to the flour. In a separate bowl, crack the eggs and gently beat with a whisk. Pour into the rest of the ingredients and, either by hand using a spatula or with an electric whisk, mix until you have a smooth well combined mixture that drops easily of a spoon. If the mixture is a little bit stiff add 1-2 table spoon of semi skimmed milk to loosen it slightly.

Divide the sponge mixture equally between the prepared tins and level out the surface with a palette knife. Gently tap the tins on the work surface to knock out any larger air pockets. Place in the pre-heated oven on the middle shelf side by side and bake for 30-35 minutes again resisting the urge to open the oven door.

To check if the sponges are ready, insert a small knife into the centre of the cooked sponge and the blade should come out clean. When you press down the centre of the sponge with your finger it should feel firm and spring back. Remove them from the oven then wait for about 5 minutes before turning them out on to a cooling rack and carefully peeling off the silicon paper from the base.

Place one of the sponges flat side down and, with a serrated knife, level it off if required and then spread generously with the strawberry jam and then with the cream. You can either place the cream in a piping bag and pipe on top of the jam or simply smear and evenly spread the cream using a palate knife. If required again take a serrated knife and level off the second sponge base which then gets turned upside down so the bottom is facing up the way to create a smooth finish to the top of the Victoria Sponge.

To finish take a paper doyley and place on top of the sponge and dust with the icing sugar to create a nice pattern on the top of the sponge.