

Rise to the challenge

Faultless pastry and puds aren't just for the pros. **Laura Goodman** shows how practice makes perfect, even for the messy amateur, while overleaf, **Florence Knight** adds a twist to the classics

I love getting things done. And sometimes, when I've got absolutely nothing done, I love the fact that I can bring flour, butter, sugar and eggs together and make something that will rise and fill the house with the buttery scent of success. My approach to baking is quite slapdash. I wouldn't go on television and bake for all to see. If you gave me a "technical" challenge — just the

ingredients, no method — I'm not sure what I'd do, but I know I'd do it spectacularly, covered liberally with all the ingredients I didn't know how to use. So, how do these "self-taught" bakers on Bake Off become so good that they can knock up a macaroon just for decoration? Some of them have had far fewer years on earth than me, and yet there they are, their croquebouches standing tall.

I decided I'd try to perfect some classics — real classics, such as lemon tart and millefeuille — using recipes from as close to the source as possible. And I'd do it properly, on full, clear days, not in between Homeland episodes or social obligations. I'd weigh things out in bowls, I'd wipe up as I worked, and I'd get hold of every single ingredient, however pointless it seemed.

NEW YORK CHEESECAKE

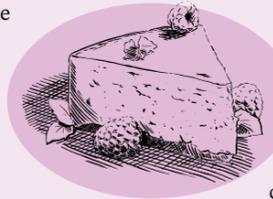
The baked cheesecakes I have made in the past have been nice, but they haven't been New York nice. They've had digestives or ginger nuts as their bases, which is about as not-New York as it gets. So, I found a recipe from Junior's, the Brooklyn-based cheesecake maker, in its book *Junior's Home Cooking*.

The Junior's cheesecake has a sponge base, which appeals to me wildly, because I love to let that creamy cheese shine, and I don't like to faff about with crumbs.

The actual cheesecake mix is a baker's dream — cheese, cream, vanilla, eggs

and sugar — mixed until they're smooth and glossy. The recipe tells me it will turn into "billowy clouds". But it also says, "Be careful not to overmix", which has to be the most annoyingly unspecific instruction in the world.

Nonetheless, it's somewhere close to billowy when it ripples into the tin. I pop it into a water bath, so it steams while it bakes, which, they say, is the secret to a proper New York cheesecake. They are right. The result is the most genuine cheesecake I've tasted in a private home — crusty on top and smooth in the middle, with the cutest, lemon-scented sponge bottom.



CHOCOLATE FONDANT

I make fondant batter while my boyfriend makes minestrone soup, which is against my own rules. He leans over my bowl to reach for the ladle just as it looks like my (eight) eggs are scrambling, but I remain calm, remembering the glory of my cheesecake, and everything is fine.

Michel Roux Sr, whose recipe I am using, says the fondants are cooked when they feel soft "and the skewer meets with no resistance", and I'm worried I won't be able to identify that moment.

But when the fondants hit the 8 minutes, 44 seconds mark (I am kneeling beside the oven, watching avidly), I can see and feel the difference between "soft" and "liquid". I whip them out. Members of my family do their best Gregg Wallace impressions as the fondants reveal their liquid centres. And the rest is history.



SHORTBREAD

I fed my family chocolate fondants on a Wednesday night, so I'm sure I can make shortbread — after all, it's just butter, sugar and flour. But this is no time to be complacent. I want my shortbread to be short and buttery and manipulated into a tidy, authentic wheel. And I'm not known for my ability to finesse.

I turn to the recipe in Leiths *How to Cook*, which also uses ground rice for crumbliness.

I don't have the flan ring they want me to use, but I do have the side bit of a loose-bottomed tin. I pat the dough inside it, then smooth it out with the back of a spoon, creating a perfect circle. I trim some of the less neat edges and then crimp them, which seems so advanced, but actually just requires two fingers and a thumb. And I score it into eight



wedges with a sharp knife. It goes in the fridge, alongside a ball of pastry (for later), a bowl of fondant mix and a whole cheesecake. I go to the gym. I work at least 45 hours every week but I have never felt as accomplished as this.

The shortbread bakes perfectly. It's a reminder that, sometimes, just the basic ingredients will do.



Prepare yourself

- Read the recipe all the way through before you do anything. Read it twice, in fact.
- Measure everything out before you start. This genuinely makes a world of difference.
- Chill your biscuit dough and your pastry before you bake it.
- Roll your pastry dough between two sheets of clingfilm if it's giving you grief.
- If you're working with your hands, keep rinsing your hands in cold water, so that everything stays cool.
- Run your knife under hot water before cutting your tart or your cheesecake — you'll get supremely smooth-edged slices.

LEMON TART

The ball of pastry lives in the fridge for 24 hours. There is a ton of it — 50% too much for my normal-sized quiche case. Marco Pierre White, allegedly king of the tart, says, "Leave a 1cm overhang", but I leave more than that, because what's the harm?



The harm is that, once the blind bake is under way, the overhang falls down in droopy, greasy clumps. It forms little corrugated biscuits in the ridges of the oven shelf. It covers the pizza tray underneath. I try to ignore it while I make the filling; the recipe makes at least twice as much as I need.

I've seen this bit done before, so I pour as much of the filling as will fit into the pastry case while it's still in the oven, managing to splatter quite a lot of it on the oven door. It has White's 30 minutes, and then needs another 30, until the filling is set. So I really have no idea any more.

Somehow, the lemon tart that emerges — having self-trimmed its edges — is reasonably neat and incredibly curdy and delicious. But the oven needs an hour of my time.

MILLEFEUILLE

Of course I've saved the millefeuille for last. Wouldn't you? I tried to make puff pastry once before, and I ended up sliding the whole fatty thing into the bin. So, this time, I watch several how-to videos first.

There is much rolling and folding, but I am meticulous about it, straightening my lovely oblong's sides and giving it time out in the fridge whenever it needs. The recipe I'm using is from

Professional Baking by Wayne Gisslen, and it's aimed at legitimate professionals. His praline millefeuille requires praline crème pâtissière, as well as praline pailletine, a thin, crisp layer made of ice cream wafers and chocolate.

Eventually, everything is in the fridge and the pastry has had its sixth "turn". I place it

in the oven and sit watching. It turns golden and it puffs. "It's puffing!" I tell people on WhatsApp.

Once it's all assembled, my millefeuille is three monumentally flaky layers of pastry, filled with smooth praline cream and a thin,

crunchy layer of pailletine. It's wonky and I didn't let the crème pat set for long enough, so the bottom layer is oozing like nobody's business. It looks

like a Parisian pâtissier's nightmare, but I don't care because I'm just delighted that my pastry has worked, that my cream tastes so dreamily good and that I made this from scratch.

The main lesson I've learnt is that I don't yearn to make a millefeuille that's structurally and visually pristine; I only yearn to make one that's delicious. And I can. ■

