

Raised Buckwheat Cakes

Time: 30 minutes to prepare (including a 20-minute rise for the sponge), followed by an overnight rise for the finished batter; 10 minutes to cook

Call them blini, call them pancakes, these melting, zephyr-light cakes with a lacy, crisp surface and a dark, woodsy phalanx of buckwheat, brown butter, and ale will leave you speechless, whatever their appellation. Yeast is the elevating dimension in these griddlecakes, producing a supple, elegant rise, a blisteringly crisp patina, and vaulted fermentation flavors that leave baking powder in the dust.

Serve the pancakes hot off the griddle with sweet orange butter and sugar, butter and jam, sautéed apples, or whatever you fancy. Or take them into the evening and serve them as hors d'oeuvres, slightly warm, with smoked salmon or trout, crème fraîche, and chives. All that aside, we really like these pancakes best in their natural state: bright hot with butter and slipping from our fingers—a saucer of sugar on hand to cushion their fall.

Equipment Mise en Place

For this recipe you will need a kitchen scale, 2 smallish saucepans, 2 medium mixing bowls, a whisk, a rubber spatula, a 1-ounce ladle or tablespoon, a basting brush, a well-seasoned 9- or 10-inch cast-iron skillet or similarly sized cast-iron griddle, and a metal spatula.

Ingredients

For the sponge:

1 cup whole milk

1/2 teaspoon instant yeast

1/2 cup (2.6 ounces) Anson Mills Aromatic New-Crop Buckwheat Flour

1/2 cup (2.5 ounces) strong, white flour, such as King Arthur Organic Baker's Classic Bread Flour or King Arthur European-Style Artisan Bread Flour

For the batter:

10 tablespoons unsalted butter

2 tablespoons vegetable oil

2 large eggs

1 to 2 tablespoons dark brown sugar

Scant teaspoon fine sea salt

Cooking Remarks

We wrote this recipe for a slow, cool overnight fermentation to give the batter maximum flavor impact and a jump on breakfast in the morning. If you want to cook and serve the cakes later in the day, make the batter in the morning and give it a good 6- to 8-hour rise in the refrigerator. You can make the cakes earlier in the day and reheat them, uncovered, in a 200-degree oven for 20 minutes, but they will not be as fine.

This recipe calls for a total of 1 1/2 cups buckwheat flour, divided between the sponge and the batter. Use the lower amount of brown sugar if your final preparation will be savory.

1/2 cup brown ale or dark beer

1 cup (5.2 ounces) Anson Mills Aromatic New-Crop Buckwheat Flour

Directions

1. *Make the sponge:* Heat the milk in a small saucepan until bubbles appear around the edges and a plume of vapor rises from the top. Pour it into a medium bowl and cool to body temperature. Sprinkle yeast over the top. Wait 5 minutes, then stir. Whisk 1/2 cup each buckwheat and white flour into the milk and beat until smooth. Cover with plastic wrap and let the sponge rest until puffy and fragrant, about 30 minutes.

2. *Make the batter:* Melt the butter in a small saucepan over low heat. Part the foam with a spoon and skim off 2 tablespoons of clear butter fat; reserve. Heat the remaining butter over low heat without stirring until it turns nutty brown, about 5 minutes. Remove from the heat; add the vegetable oil and cool to lukewarm.

3. Whisk the eggs together in a medium bowl, add the brown butter, sugar, and salt, and whisk to combine. Whisk in the ale. Using a rubber spatula, scrape the reserved sponge into the liquid ingredients and whisk until smooth. Whisk in the remaining 1 cup buckwheat flour. The batter should have the consistency of a satiny cake batter. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight or 6 to 8 hours during the day.

4. *Cook the pancakes:* Remove the batter from the refrigerator (it should be pitted with small bubbles and issue a pleasantly fermented aroma) and stir it down *gently* with a spoon or small ladle. If the batter is too thick to drop easily from a spoon, you can thin it with a little milk or ale. Set a well-seasoned 9- or 10-inch cast-iron skillet or similarly sized cast-iron griddle over medium-low heat. The skillet is hot enough when drops of water dropped onto its surface sizzle, about 10 minutes.

5. Dip a heatproof basting brush or wadded paper towel into the reserved butter fat and brush it across the surface of the hot skillet. Drop the pancakes one at a time into the pan, using a 1-ounce ladle for larger cakes or a tablespoon for smaller. When the pancakes are nicely browned on the bottom and have begun to bubble on the top, 2 to 3 minutes, flip the cakes and brown the other side, 1 or 2 minutes longer.

6. Transfer the pancakes to a plate and give them to someone to eat. Regrease the skillet and cook the next batch of pancakes.

Makes about 2 dozen 4-inch cakes or 3 dozen 3-inch cakes