



• 25 BEST RECIPES IN THE HISTORY OF EVER! •





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SWEET & SOUR CHICKEN



Easily the most popular recipe on my blog, this sweet and sour chicken is a miracle of a dish. A million percent better than any takeout, the chicken bakes up tender with a beautiful crust and is coated perfectly with the sweet and tangy flavors of the sauce.

- YIELD: SERVES 4 TO 6 -

Note: if you like extra sauce, double the sauce ingredients – pour half over the chicken and follow the recipe instructions; pour the other half in a small saucepan and cook the sauce on the stovetop at a simmer for 8-10 minutes until it reduces and thickens. Serve it on the side of the chicken.

CHICKEN:

3-4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
(about 2 pounds)
Salt and pepper
1 cup cornstarch
2 large eggs, beaten
1/4 cup canola, vegetable or coconut oil

SAUCE:

3/4 cup granulated sugar
4 tablespoons ketchup
1/2 cup apple cider vinegar
1 tablespoon soy sauce
1 teaspoon garlic salt

DIRECTIONS:

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees F. Cut the chicken breasts into 1-inch pieces. Season with salt and pepper. Place the cornstarch in a gallon-sized ziploc bag. Put the chicken into the bag with the cornstarch and seal, tossing to coat the chicken.

Whisk the eggs together in a shallow pie plate. Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium heat until very hot and rippling. Dip the cornstarch-coated chicken pieces in the egg and place them carefully in a single layer in the hot skillet.

Cook for 20-30 seconds on each side until the crust is golden but the chicken is not all the way cooked through (this is where it's really important to have a hot skillet/oil). Place the chicken pieces in a single layer in a 9X13-inch baking dish and repeat with the remaining chicken pieces.

Mix the sauce ingredients together in a medium bowl and pour over the chicken. Bake for one hour, turning the chicken once or twice while cooking to coat evenly with sauce. Serve over hot, steamed rice.

WHAT TO SERVE WITH THIS:

[Baked Brown Rice](#)

Steamed Broccoli

[Creamy 5-Cup Fruit Salad](#) or fresh, seasonal fruit

CRISPY SOUTHWEST CHICKEN WRAPS

Mel's
KITCHEN CAFE

Full of flavor, these wraps are a snap to make, and they make great leftovers. This is one of the most adaptable recipes. Feel free to up the cilantro, add in a different meat of your choice, eliminate the pepper, add green chilies – seriously, the options are endless.

- YIELD: MAKES 6 WRAPS -

INGREDIENTS:

1 cup cooked rice, warm or at room temperature
1 cup cooked, shredded chicken (or other leftover meat, like shredded pork or beef)
1 can black beans, rinsed and drained
1 green onion, finely sliced (white and green parts)
1/2 red or green pepper, diced
1/4 cup fresh cilantro, chopped
juice of 1 lime
1/2 tablespoon chili powder
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1/2 teaspoon garlic salt
2 cups shredded cheese (I use a combination of Monterey jack and sharp cheddar)
Sour cream (optional)
6 burrito-sized flour tortillas

DIRECTIONS:

Mix rice together with chili powder, cumin and garlic salt. Add remaining ingredients except for cheese and sour cream. Sprinkle cheese over tortillas, leaving 1/2-inch border around edges, then arrange chicken and rice mixture down the center of each tortilla. (Optional: I like to dollop little bits of sour cream over the cheese before arranging chicken and rice mixture down the center – it makes the wraps delightfully creamy.) Roll stuffed tortillas, leaving edges open and slightly flatten the wraps with the palm of your hand. Spray seam-side of the wrap lightly with cooking spray.

Heat a large non-stick skillet (or griddle) over medium heat for 1 minute. Arrange wraps, seam-side down, in pan or griddle and cook until golden brown and crisp, about 2-3 minutes per side. Cooking them seam-side down first helps seal the long edge so they don't fall apart. Transfer to a plate and repeat with remaining wraps. Serve warm.

WHAT TO SERVE WITH THIS:

Served with a light green salad and some fresh fruit and veggies (or perhaps [this delicious fruit concoction](#)) and this is a perfectly perfect meal for any night of the week!



Mel's

KITCHEN CAFE

GRILLED ISLAND CHICKEN



This is definitely some of the juiciest, most flavorful chicken around and is perfect for those warm months that are creeping up when I want to avoid turning on my oven.

- YIELD: SERVES 2 TO 4 DEPENDING ON HOW MANY CHICKEN BREASTS ARE MARINATED -

INGREDIENTS:

1/3 cup vegetable oil
3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice (from about 1-2 lemons)
1 1/2 tablespoons soy sauce
1 clove garlic, finely minced
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2-4 chicken breasts

DIRECTIONS:

Combine all ingredients except chicken in a mixing bowl or large airtight plastic bag. Whisk or shake well until the marinade is well mixed. Add the chicken breasts to the bowl or plastic bag so that they are covered by the marinade. If using a bowl, cover tightly with plastic wrap. If using a plastic bag, press out all the excess air and seal the bag tightly. Refrigerate and marinate up to 10 hours (I would suggest marinating for at least 3 hours at the minimum).

Preheat a gas or charcoal grill to medium heat. Grill the chicken for 6-7 minutes per side (depending on how thick the chicken breasts are), until the chicken is no longer pink in the center (if you have a meat thermometer, the chicken should register 165 degrees). Tent with foil and let the chicken rest for about five minutes before serving.

Alternately, the chicken can be baked using the following directions:

When ready to cook the chicken, preheat the oven to 350° F. Place the chicken breasts in a baking dish and pour the excess marinade over them. Bake in the oven until cooked through and the internal temperature reaches 165° F, about 45 minutes (exact baking time will depend on the size of your chicken pieces.) Remove from the oven and let rest for 5 minutes before serving.

WHAT TO SERVE WITH THIS:

I have served it with everything from these [sweet potato skewers](#) (also grilled) and [corn on the cob](#), to this [Zucchini Mozzarella Medley](#), to this [Black Bean and Corn Quinoa Salad](#), to this [stuffed zucchini](#). You can serve just about anything with this chicken.

• [CLICK HERE TO FIND THIS RECIPE AND OTHERS AT MELSKITCHENCAFE.COM](http://MELSKITCHENCAFE.COM) •

CREAMY TUSCAN PASTA SAUCE

Mel's
KITCHEN CAFE

This is delicious as is, but toss a few chopped, fresh tomatoes on top and a bit of fresh basil and it is pure pasta heaven. The fact that it is made from scratch and comes together in 20-minutes is like, huge bonus of the year.

QUICK 20 MINUTE DINNER

YIELD: SERVES 4 TO 6

Note: This would be delicious with grilled or cooked chicken thrown into the mix. Also, you can use lowfat cream cheese and lowfat milk; the sauce is more creamy and smooth the higher fat content you go but I usually stick with 1% milk and less fat cream cheese and we love it. If you have fresh basil, scrap the dried basil and add in about 1/4 cup chopped fresh basil at the end of cooking (or do a combination of dried and fresh for maximum basil flavor). To maximize how quickly this meal comes together, start the noodles cooking at the same time you start the sauce.

INGREDIENTS:

4 tablespoons butter
4 cloves garlic, finely minced or pressed through a garlic press
1/2 tablespoon dried basil
8 ounces cream cheese, softened and cut into 8 pieces
8-ounce jar sun-dried tomatoes, rinsed, drained and chopped
2 cups milk
6 ounces Parmesan cheese, grated (about 2 cups)
1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
1/2 teaspoon salt, more to taste, if needed
Diced fresh tomatoes, fresh basil for topping (optional)

DIRECTIONS:

In a medium pot or skillet, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the garlic and cook for about 2 minutes, stirring constantly, taking care not to let the garlic burn. Stir in the dried basil. Add the cream cheese, stirring with a whisk until the mixture is smooth. It will look curdled at first, but with constant whisking for 2-3 minutes, it should come together to form a smooth, creamy paste. Stir in the sun-dried tomatoes.

Over medium heat, add the milk gradually, about 1/4 cup at a time, whisking quickly and constantly until each addition is incorporated fully into the sauce. Stir in the Parmesan cheese, pepper and salt. Cook over medium heat, stirring until the cheese is melted and the sauce is the desired consistency, 5-10 minutes. Serve over hot, cooked noodles.

WHAT TO SERVE WITH THIS:

[Simple Skillet Green Beans](#), [Amazing Romaine Salad](#)



BROCCOLI BEEF



So let's be real here for a second. I eat a lot of food. And I eat a lot of really great food.
So when I declare something the best – you have to know I mean business.
Seriously, this beef and broccoli is that good!

- YIELD: SERVES 4 TO 5 -

BEEF AND BROCCOLI:

3 tablespoons soy sauce
1 1/2 pounds flank steak, cut into 2-inch-wide strips
with the grain, then sliced across the grain into 1/8-inch-
thick slices
6 medium cloves garlic, pressed through garlic press
or minced (about 2 tablespoons)
1-inch piece fresh ginger, minced (about 1 tablespoon)
1 teaspoon peanut oil or vegetable oil, plus extra
for cooking
1 1/4 pounds broccoli, cut into bite-sized pieces
1/3 cup water
3 medium scallions, sliced 1/2-inch thick on diagonal,
optional

SAUCE:

1 tablespoon rice wine vinegar
2 tablespoons low-sodium chicken broth
5 tablespoons oyster sauce
2 tablespoons light brown sugar
1 teaspoon toasted sesame oil
2 teaspoons cornstarch

DIRECTIONS:

In a medium bowl, combine beef and soy sauce. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate at least 10 minutes or up to 1 hour. Meanwhile, whisk the sauce ingredients together in a liquid measure or small bowl. In another small bowl, combine garlic, ginger, and 1 teaspoon peanut oil. Set aside.

Heat 1-2 teaspoons peanut oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until hot and rippling. Add half of beef to skillet and break up clumps; cook, without stirring, for 1 minute, then stir and cook until beef is browned around edges and cooked through, about 1-2 minutes. Don't overcook the meat – cook until just barely cooked through so the meat stays tender. Transfer beef to a medium bowl and cover with a lid and tin foil. Heat another 1-2 teaspoons peanut oil in the skillet and repeat with remaining beef.

Add 1 tablespoon peanut oil to now-empty skillet; heat until rippling and hot. Add broccoli and cook 30 seconds; add water, cover pan, and lower heat to medium. Steam broccoli until tender-crisp, about 2 minutes. Push the broccoli to the sides of the skillet and add the garlic/ginger mixture. Cook, mashing the mixture with a spoon, until fragrant, about 15-30 seconds. Stir the mixture into the broccoli. Add the beef back to skillet and toss to combine. Whisk the sauce to recombine and add to the skillet. Cook, stirring constantly, until sauce is thickened and evenly distributed, about 1-2 minutes. Transfer to a serving platter, sprinkle with scallions, and serve – or be like me and serve it straight out of the skillet!

WHAT TO SERVE WITH THIS:

[Baked Brown Rice](#), [Stovetop Brown Rice](#), or hot, cooked white rice
Cut up pineapple or other fresh, seasonal fruit
[Asian Noodle Salad](#) or a simple green salad

THE BEST GROUND BEEF TACOS

Mel's
KITCHEN CAFE

No question about it, these are the best ground beef tacos in the world. Flavorful and delicious, they are nearly as simple as using a packet of taco seasoning and they've been our favorites for years and years.

- YIELD: SERVES 4 TO 6 -

INGREDIENTS:

2 tablespoons canola oil
3/4 cup chopped onion
1 pound ground beef or ground turkey
1 to 3 garlic cloves
1 tablespoon chili powder
2 teaspoons ground cumin
2 teaspoons ground coriander
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon pepper
1 (8-ounce) can tomato sauce

1 jalapeno, seeded and minced fine
(alternately, you can add hot pepper sauce to taste or canned jalapenos OR just leave out the heat altogether, although I think the meat really needs a little kick and adding the jalapeno without seeds doesn't make the dish overly spicy)
Taco shells
Additional taco garnishes

DIRECTIONS:

In a large skillet over medium heat, add the oil and chopped onion. Cook, stirring often, until the onion is softened, about 4-5 minutes. Add the ground beef and cook, breaking up the meat into smaller chunks, until it is cooked through, about 5 minutes. Off the heat, drain the grease from the meat.

Return the skillet to the heat and stir in the garlic, chili powder, cumin, coriander, salt and pepper. Cook for about 30 seconds and then add the tomato sauce and jalapeno. Turn the heat to low and simmer the meat mixture for about 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Serve in taco shells with your choice of toppings.

WHAT TO SERVE WITH THIS:

Fresh fruit, or this [Honey Lime Fruit Salad](#)
[Hummus](#) with fresh vegetables
Cottage Cheese



LOADED BROCCOLI CHEESE & BACON SOUP



If the thought of bacon and cheese has you crying for a healthier soup, well, let your woes be gone! The ten cups (ten cups!) of vegetables in this soup should put your mind at ease. It has fabulous cheesy flavor with tender bits of broccoli and carrots and potatoes - all swirling around in the creamy, silky soup."

- YIELD: SERVES 8 -

INGREDIENTS:

3 cups low-sodium chicken broth	4-6 slices bacon, chopped
1 cup peeled and chopped carrots, diced small	3 tablespoons butter
1 cup chopped celery, diced small	1/3 cup flour
3 cups peeled and chopped potatoes, diced small	3 cups milk
1/2 cup finely chopped onion	4 cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese (about 16 ounces)
4-5 cups broccoli crowns, diced small (about 2 heads of broccoli)	1 teaspoon salt
	1/2 teaspoon pepper
	1 teaspoon dried mustard

DIRECTIONS:

In a large saucepan, combine the chicken broth, carrots, celery, potatoes and onion. Bring the mixture to a boil, cover and simmer for 10 minutes, until the vegetables are starting to get tender.

Add the chopped broccoli. Cover and simmer for another 10 minutes. The pan is going to be very full of vegetables and it might seem like it isn't "soupy" enough since the vegetables overpower the broth but I promise it will all work out when you add the cheese mixture.

In a separate medium saucepan, saute the bacon until golden and crisp. Remove the bacon to a paper towel-lined plate. Drain the grease and wipe out the saucepan.

Melt the butter (in the same saucepan you cooked the bacon in) over medium heat. Whisk in the flour and cook for 1-2 minutes until golden, stirring constantly. Gradually whisk in the milk and cook until the mixture is bubbling and is slightly thickened, 5-7 minutes.

Stir in the cheddar cheese one handful at a time, adding another handful after the cheese that has been added has melted. Stir in the salt, pepper and dry mustard.

Slowly stir the cheese sauce into the hot broth and vegetables, whisking to combine well. Stir in the reserved bacon and add additional salt and pepper to taste, if needed. If you want the soup a bit thinner, stir in a little extra broth or milk a bit at a time until you get the consistency you are looking for.

WHAT TO SERVE WITH THIS:

[Artisan](#) or [Italian Bread Bowls](#)

Simple green Salad (or for an extra special salad this [Spinach Salad with Spicy Nuts](#))

Fresh, seasonal fruit

SLOW COOKER JALAPENO POPPER WHITE BEAN CHILI

Mel's
KITCHEN CAFE

There is nothing quite like a warm bowl of chili on a cold/frozen/icy/wintery/subzero/I'm barely surviving kind of day. While I love chili in all its forms, if you twisted my arm and forced me to choose, I would have to say I'm partial to white bean chilis and this white bean jalapeno popper chili fits right in there with my favorites.

- YIELD: SERVES 6 TO 8 -

Note: Before adding the chicken back in and before stirring in the cream cheese and corn, you can blend a couple cups of the soup to a smooth consistency and stir it back into the pot for a thicker variation. I've done it both ways...and love it both ways. The flavor is ultimately the winning factor. Finally, this soup is not spicy. If you'd like to make it with more heat, you can leave the seeds in the jalapenos or add a touch or more of cayenne pepper or red pepper flakes.

INGREDIENTS:

1 cup chopped yellow or white onion	1 (14-ounce) can diced tomatoes, undrained
2 jalapeno peppers, seeded and finely chopped	4 cups low-sodium chicken broth
3 cloves garlic, finely minced or pressed	12 ounces dry white beans, rinsed and picked through to remove any stones or bad beans
1/2 cup red or yellow bell pepper, small diced	1 teaspoon salt
1 pound chicken breasts, trimmed of fat (about 2 chicken breasts)	1/2 teaspoon pepper
1 teaspoon chili powder	8 ounces light cream cheese, cut into cubes
1 teaspoon ground cumin	1 cup frozen corn kernels
1 teaspoon dried oregano	6-8 slices bacon, cooked and crumbled or chopped

DIRECTIONS:

Add all the ingredients except the cream cheese, corn and bacon to a 5-quart slow cooker. Cook on low for 7-9 hours.

Remove the chicken and chop into pieces or shred into bite-sized pieces. See the note above about thickening part of the soup. Make your decision. Then return the chicken to the slow cooker.

Stir in the cubed cream cheese and the corn. Cover the slow cooker to let the cream cheese soften and the corn heat through, about 10-15 minutes.

Stir to combine. Add additional salt and pepper to taste. Serve topped with the crumbled bacon.

WHAT TO SERVE WITH THIS:

Tortilla chips (for crushing over the soup or just for dipping)

Fresh, seasonal fruit or [this fruit salad](#)

[The Best Cornbread and Fluffy Honey Butter](#)



HEALTHY APPLESAUCE OAT MUFFINS



Not only are these applesauce muffins healthy but they are also moist and very delicious. Ok, so they may not be the prettiest muffins to look at it but do I really need to insert overstated cliches here? Looks aren't everything, people.

After wrangling the recipe from Miss Katie, I've made double batch after double batch, freezing so I can pull them out for school lunches and random snacks. I love knowing that I can throw something this healthy into my kids' lunches without requiring any prep time the night before. You know, because making a sandwich is, like, so hard. Thank you freezer. Thank you muffins that freeze well.

- YIELD: MAKES 12 MUFFINS -

INGREDIENTS:

1 cup rolled/old-fashioned oats	3/4 cup whole wheat flour
1 cup unsweetened applesauce	1 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 cup milk	1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1 large egg	1 teaspoon cinnamon
1 teaspoon vanilla	1/4 teaspoon salt
4 tablespoons butter or coconut oil, melted	1/2 cup dried cranberries or raisins, optional
1/3 cup sugar	

DIRECTIONS:

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees F. Line a 12-cup muffin tin with liners or grease the muffin cups. Set aside.

In a medium bowl, stir together the oatmeal, applesauce, milk, egg, vanilla, butter and sugar. Set aside.

In a large bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon and salt (and cranberries or raisins if using). Make a well in the center and pour in the applesauce mixture. Stir until just combined (don't overmix or the muffins will be dense and dry). The muffin batter texture might be a bit different (wetter?) than other muffin batters but no fear, carry on!

Distribute the batter evenly among the 12 muffin cups. Bake for 15-20 minutes until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Don't overbake or the muffins will be dry.

Remove the muffins to a rack to cool completely. Once cool, I place 6-9 muffins in a large freezer ziploc bag, suck all the air out (oh yes I do) and seal the bag, then freeze, pulling them out one by one to stick in my kids lunches or warm slightly for a snack.

BUTTERMILK BANANA BREAD

Mel's
KITCHEN CAFE

This banana bread is my all-time favorite of it's kind. In fact, it is the only banana bread recipe I've made in years. Unlike the dark-flecked variety of banana bread (which is delicious in it's own right), this bread is light, both in color and texture, and it has a wonderful buttery crust that is my favorite part. I've played around with the recipe, messing with the amount of sugar/bananas, so check out the notes in the recipe to see what works!

- YIELD: MAKES 1 LARGE LOAF -

Note: Often times, I'll decrease the sugar to 1 cup, increase the bananas to 1 1/2 cups and the bread still turns out extremely moist and delicious!

INGREDIENTS:

1/2 cup butter, softened
1 1/2 cups sugar
2 eggs
1 cup mashed bananas (I use about 3 average sized bananas)
4 tablespoons buttermilk (here is a guide for making your own buttermilk)
1/2 teaspoon vanilla
1 3/4 cups flour
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon baking soda

DIRECTIONS:

Grease and flour 1 large loaf pan (9 1/4 X 5 1/4-inch) or whatever combination of pans you'd like (several commenters have said this recipe works great made into muffins or smaller loaf pans).

In a large bowl, cream butter and sugar together. Add eggs, bananas, buttermilk and vanilla until the batter is well mixed. Add in the flour, baking powder, salt and soda. Mix until well combined. Pour batter into prepared pan and bake at 350 degrees for 50-55 minutes or until a toothpick comes out clean.



CHEWY GRANOLA BARS



I've tried several homemade chewy granola bar-type recipes over the last few months. They've been good. Really. But these are the best of the bunch. Sure, the mini chocolate chips on top don't hurt matters any, but the granola bars themselves are delicious, too. Toasting the oats is optional but divine, and pressing the mixture firmly ensures the granola bars don't fall apart and become crumbly instead of chewy. Crumbly = bad. Chewy = good. Enjoy!

- YIELD: SERVES 10 TO 12 BARS -

Note: Don't substitute rolled oats for the quick oats because the granola bars will fall apart. If you only have rolled oats, give them a very quick process in a blender or food processor (don't pulverize them!). Also, if you want to take these to a new level, toast the oats in the oven (350 degrees for 4-7 minutes) and let cool before using them in the recipe. Amazing.

INGREDIENTS:

4 tablespoons butter
1/4 cup honey
1/4 cup packed light brown sugar
2 cups quick cooking oats
1 cup rice krispies cereal
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/4 cup mini chocolate chips

DIRECTIONS:

Lightly coat a 9X11-inch pan with cooking spray and set aside. If you don't have a pan that size, use a similar sized pan, like a 8X12-inch. This recipe is a bit small for a 9X13-inch pan but if that's all you have, just pack the granola bar mixture into a smaller portion of the pan - the mixture doesn't spread so that should work fine.

In a large bowl, stir together the oats and rice krispies. Set aside. In a small saucepan, combine the butter, honey and brown sugar. Cook over medium heat until the butter melts and the mixture comes together, stirring frequently. Cook at a simmer (so the mixture is lightly bubbling) for 2 minutes. Remove from the heat and stir in the vanilla.

Pour the wet mixture over the oats/rice krispies and mix with a wooden spoon until evenly moistened. Press the mixture into the prepared pan, pressing down very firmly. If the mixture isn't pressed down well enough, the bars will be crumbly once they cool. Sprinkle the mini chocolate chips on top. Press lightly if you want them to stick to the bars. Mine tended to fall off, which was just fine since there were a lot of little fingers ready to eagerly pick them up and eat them anyway.

Let the bars cool for at least 2 hours at room temperature. Cut into rectangles. Store well covered at room temperature for 2-3 days.

FLUFFY WHOLE WHEAT DINNER ROLLS

Mel's
KITCHEN CAFE

As with all yeast doughs, I never use the flour amount called for in the recipe as a hard fast rule. Because humidity, temperature, altitude and a multitude of other factors can impact how much flour you need in your yeast doughs, I always judge when to quit adding flour by the texture and look and feel of the dough rather than how much flour I've added compared to the recipe. This [tutorial on yeast](#) may help identify how a perfectly floured dough should be. Also, [here's](#) a video tutorial on how to shape the rolls.

- YIELD: MAKES 12 ROLLS -

INGREDIENTS:

1 1/2 cups warm water	1 teaspoon salt
3/4 tablespoon instant yeast (or 1 tablespoon active dry yeast)	1/4 cup vital wheat gluten (see note)
2 tablespoons granulated sugar	3-4 cups whole wheat flour, give or take a little (see note)
2 tablespoons canola or vegetable oil	

DIRECTIONS:

In the bowl of a stand mixer or in a large bowl by hand, combine the warm water, yeast, sugar, oil, salt, gluten, and 2 cups of the flour. If you are using active dry yeast instead of instant yeast, let the yeast proof in the warm water and sugar for about 3-5 minutes until it is foamy and bubbly before adding the oil, salt, gluten and flour.

While mixing, gradually add the rest of the flour until the dough has pulled away from the sides of the bowl. Judge the dough by how it feels, not necessarily by the exact flour amount called for in the recipe (see a tutorial on working with yeast [here](#)). The dough should be soft and smooth but still slightly tacky to the touch.

Knead the dough in the stand mixer or by hand until it is very smooth and elastic, about 7 minutes in a stand mixer or 10-12 minutes by hand. As the dough is kneaded, it will continue to absorb some of the liquid and become less sticky so take care not to overflour at first as the texture will change as it kneads - and you can always add a bit of flour partway through if it seems overly sticky.

If kneading by hand, instead of flour, try using a bit of oil or cooking spray on the counter to help prevent stickiness. That way the dough doesn't get overfloured. Lightly spray a large bowl with cooking spray and place the dough in the bowl. Cover the bowl with lightly greased plastic wrap. Let the dough rise until it has doubled, 1-2 hours.

Lightly punch down the dough and turn it out onto a lightly greased countertop. Divide the dough into 12 equal pieces and form the dough into round balls (a video tip on shaping the dough into rolls [here](#)).

Place the rolls on a lightly greased or silpat-lined baking sheet about an inch or two apart. Cover the rolls with lightly greased plastic wrap. Let the plastic wrap gently hang over the sides of the pan to fully cover the rolls but not press them down. Let the rolls rise until doubled, about 45 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Bake for 12-14 minutes until lightly browned and cooked through.



SIMPLE SKILLET GREEN BEANS



This recipe proves that side dishes for dinner don't have to be fussy or fancy or complicated. You are only three-ish ingredients and 12 or so minutes away from fresh green bean heaven. I'm so lazy I don't even trim the ends of the beans all the time (or very thoroughly) in my haste to get this delectable side dish on the table and they are still wonderful. Untrimming green beaners unite!

- YIELD: SERVES 4 TO 6 -

Note: After trimming the ends of the green beans, you can cut them into 1- or 2-inch lengths, but I usually leave them long so I can maybe, hopefully teach my kids the importance of cutting up food on their plate before shoveling it into their mouths.

INGREDIENTS:

1 teaspoon oil or butter
1 pound fresh green beans, ends trimmed
3/4 cup low-sodium chicken or vegetable broth
Salt and pepper to taste

DIRECTIONS:

In a large 12-inch nonstick skillet, heat the oil or butter over medium heat. Add the green beans and cook for 2-3 minutes, stirring often, to crisp up the edges of the beans just slightly.

Pour in the broth and bring the beans/broth to a simmer. Cover the skillet and cook anywhere from 6-10 minutes, depending on how tender you like your green beans. Keep an eye on the skillet - if it is simmering too vigorously and the liquid evaporates out, add a bit more as needed.

Season with salt and pepper to taste and serve immediately.

BROCCOLI SALAD

Mel's
KITCHEN CAFE

I was ecstatic when my Aunt Marilyn emailed me this recipe and was even more pleased with the result, which was a slight tweak from the original recipe. Personally, I get frightened by raisins in nearly anything (including cinnamon rolls, don't hate me!) so I left those out, but I left it in the recipe with a clear "optional" since I know many people aren't weird like me and would like the raisiny contrast. Additionally, I cut down the mayo in the recipe a bit and swapped out the red wine vinegar for balsamic to give the dressing a bit more depth of flavor. The salad ends up being lightly dressed in a subtly but not overpoweringly sweet and tangy dressing. My favorite part? The crunchy sunflower seeds and crisp bacon.

Oh yes. Major yum.

- YIELD: SERVES 4 TO 6 -

DRESSING:

3/4 cup light or regular mayonnaise
1/4 cup granulated sugar
1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar

SALAD:

1 1/2 pounds fresh broccoli, chopped into small bite-sized pieces
1 cup golden raisins (optional)
3/4 cup sunflower seeds
1 small shallot or red onion, finely diced (about 1/4 cup)
1 cup shredded sharp cheddar cheese
6 slices bacon, cooked and crumbled

DIRECTIONS:

In a small bowl, whisk together all of the dressing ingredients. Set aside.

In a large bowl, toss the salad ingredients together. Pour the dressing over the broccoli mixture and toss to coat all the ingredients with the sauce. Chill in the refrigerator for at least 2 hours before serving. Right before serving, give the salad another good toss to recombine any dressing that may have settled at the bottom.



CRANBERRY SALSA



People go crazy over this stuff. And it couldn't be easier: toss everything in a blender or food processor and chop choppity chop. If your blender or food processor is on the small side and doesn't chop up large batches of ingredients very well, consider chopping the ingredients separately or in batches and then combining in a bowl.

- YIELD: ABOUT 4 CUPS OF SALSA -

INGREDIENTS:

1 12-ounce package fresh cranberries
1 granny smith apple, peeled, cored and chopped
1/4 medium red onion, peeled and roughly chopped
1/2 large red pepper, roughly chopped
3/4 cup granulated sugar
1/3 cup no-sugar added applesauce
1 tablespoon fresh lime juice
1/4 cup fresh cilantro
1 jalapeno, seeded and diced (use the seeds if you want more heat)
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon black pepper

DIRECTIONS:

Combine all the ingredients in a food processor or blender and pulse until combined (and it is the texture you want).

Refrigerate for at least 2 hours to give the flavors a chance to meld. It can be made and refrigerated for up to a week or longer.

Serve with tortilla chips.

HONEY LIME FRUIT SALAD

Mel's
KITCHEN CAFE

This combination is delightful and light and a perfect side dish for a myriad of dishes. What takes this fruit salad to the next level is the three secret ingredients: tart lime zest, sweet honey and the slight crunch of poppy seeds.

The icing on the cake is that it takes no more than ten minutes to throw together (possibly even less if you have some wicked can-draining and knife-wielding skills!).

- YIELD: SERVES 4 -

Note: This fruit salad is best served right away (or at least within an hour of making) because the strawberries tend to stain the light colored fruit. It doesn't affect the taste at all but is a slight bummer for presentation.

INGREDIENTS:

1 (20 oz.) can pineapple chunks, drained well
1 can mandarin oranges, drained well
2-3 ripe kiwi, peeled and sliced into thick half moons
1 cup green grapes, halved
1 cup strawberries, quartered
Zest from one lime, about 1 tablespoon
2 tablespoons honey
1 teaspoon poppy seeds (optional)

DIRECTIONS:

Combine the fruit in a medium-large serving bowl. Add the lime zest and poppy seeds, if using, and gently toss.

Drizzle the honey over the fruit and again, gently mix until the fruit is evenly coated with the honey. Serve





TRI COLOR PASTA SALAD

The dressing combination (pesto and creamy Caesar) is not overpowering, like many pasta salads, and the pine nuts give it a special crunch. This is one of my very favorite pasta salads and is always a tremendous hit at potlucks and BBQ's. It's a keeper!



- YIELD: SERVES 6 -

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 12 oz. package tri-color rotini pasta, cooked and drained
- 3 roma tomatoes, diced
- 1 can black olives, sliced
- 1/4 cup red onion, finely diced
- 3/4 cup parmesan cheese
- 6 fresh basil leaves, cut into strips
- 4 tablespoons basil pesto
- 2/3 cup creamy Caesar dressing
- 2 teaspoons sauté spice (equal parts black pepper, salt, and garlic powder)
- 1/2 to 1 cup toasted pine nuts

DIRECTIONS:

Cook pasta and coat with Caesar dressing while warm. Add the rest of the ingredients (minus the pine nuts) and toss.

Top with toasted pine nuts. Refrigerate until ready to serve.

60-SECOND CHOCOLATE CHIP MUG COOKIE

Mel's
KITCHEN CAFE

Instead of making a whole batch of cookies and having them stare you in the face for three days straight while you try to figure out every which way to avoid the temptation, the next time you need a little sweetsie something, consider this 60-second chocolate chip cookie.

Made in a mug. Cooked in the microwave.

It's luxurious all warm and melty with a scoop of ice cream or frozen yogurt and like any mug cake/cookie, it tastes best eaten right away; I'll leave it up to you whether or not you decide to share. No judging here.

- YIELD: MAKES 1 MUG COOKIE -

Note: If you are making more than one at a time, try using a whole egg, whisking it, then splitting the egg mixture between the two recipes/mugs. That way you aren't wasting two egg whites. It works just fine that way - give or take, it's about a tablespoon of egg per mug.

Also, to avoid the batter being crumbly (thanks to the commenters who stumbled upon this), mix all the wet ingredients first: butter, egg yolk, sugars and salt. Then gradually add the flour and stir in the chocolate chips.

INGREDIENTS:

1 tablespoon melted butter or coconut oil
1 tablespoon granulated sugar
1 tablespoon brown sugar
pinch of salt
1 egg yolk
1/4 cup all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons chocolate chips (regular size or mini)

DIRECTIONS:

Very lightly coat the inside of a 6-ounce or 8-ounce mug or ramekin with a smidgeon of cooking spray, butter or coconut oil. Mix all the ingredients together in the mug (to avoid the batter being crumbly, mix the butter, egg yolk, sugars and salt first before gradually stirring in the flour and adding the chocolate chips).

Microwave for one minute at 80% power (I have a 1,000 watt microwave; if your microwave has more or less watts, you may need to adjust the time a bit). The top will look light and yellow and may even seem undercooked but if you gently press the top and it lightly springs back, it's perfect (don't overcook or it will be dry and tough in spots).

Serve warm with a scoop of vanilla ice cream, if desired.



PERFECT LEMON BARS



These lemon bars have a wonderfully substantial ratio of crust to filling. I just can't get enough of that buttery, tasty shortbread (made even more tender with the surprising addition of a bit of cornstarch). And while the lemon filling is perfectly and very robustly lemon, it doesn't overpower in a way that makes you think "wow, I'm not going to be able to eat anything lemon for a week!" after tasting one. The play of lemon and sugar and eggs really works resulting in a delightfully creamy, fresh, lemony filling. Yum.

- YIELD: MAKES 9 X 13 PAN OF BARS -

FOR THE CRUST:

1 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
2/3 cup powdered sugar, plus extra to
sprinkle on bars
1/4 cup cornstarch
1/2 teaspoon salt
12 tablespoons butter (1 1/2 sticks), at cool
room temperature, cut into 1-inch pieces

FOR THE FILLING:

4 large eggs
1 1/3 cups granulated sugar
3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons grated lemon zest, from 2
large lemons
2/3 cup freshly squeezed lemon juice,
from 3 to 4 large lemons
1/3 cup milk
Pinch of salt (about 1/8 teaspoon)

DIRECTIONS:

Place an oven rack in the middle position and preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Line a 9X13-inch baking pan with foil or parchment paper and lightly grease the foil/parchment.

Stir together the flour, powdered sugar, cornstarch, and salt (this can be done in a food processor or in a large bowl by hand). Add the pieces of butter and cut the butter into the dry ingredients using a pastry blender, two knives or your fingers (taking care not to melt the butter too much - you might try freezing the butter and grating it into the dry ingredients on the large holes of a box grater) or process in the food processor for 8 to 10 seconds and then as needed until the mixture resembles coarse meal. Sprinkle the mixture into the prepared pan and press into an even layer on the bottom and about 1/2-inch up the sides of the pan. Refrigerate for 15-30 minutes. Bake until golden brown, about 20 minutes.

For the filling, whisk together the eggs, sugar, salt, and flour in a medium bowl and then stir in the lemon zest, juice and milk to combine.

Pour the filling onto the warm crust (it's important that the crust is still warm!) and reduce the oven temperature to 325 degrees. Bake for about 18-20 minutes until the filling feels slightly firm to the touch. Cool the bars to room temperature, sprinkle with additional powdered sugar and cut into bars.

OATMEAL CHOCOLATE CHUNK BARS

Mel's
KITCHEN CAFE

These cookies are sweet and chewy and a perfect alternative to scooping out oatmeal chocolate chip cookies. I just love cookies in bar form. I really do.

- YIELD: MAKES 9 X 13 PAN OF BARS -

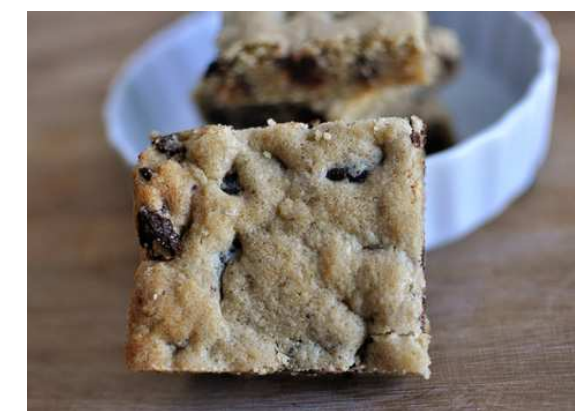
Note: I almost always double this recipe and press the dough into a large 11X17-inch rimmed sheet pan. They are delicious with any assortment of chocolate chips (butterscotch, mint, etc.).

INGREDIENTS:

1 3/4 cup all-purpose flour
3/4 teaspoon baking soda
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 cup oatmeal (quick oats or rolled oats)
3/4 cup (1 1/2 sticks) butter, softened
1/2 cup granulated sugar
1/2 cup lightly packed brown sugar
1 large egg
1 egg yolk
1 teaspoon vanilla
12 ounces semi sweet chocolate chunks
or chocolate chips

DIRECTIONS:

Preheat oven to 375 degrees F. Lightly coat a 9X13-inch baking pan with cooking spray and set aside. Whisk together dry ingredients in a small bowl and set aside. In a large bowl with a handheld electric mixer or a stand mixer, beat butter, sugars, egg and vanilla until fluffy, about 2-3 minutes. Add the dry ingredients and chocolate chips together. Mix until combined. Press into the prepared pan and bake for 18-20 minutes until light golden brown. Don't overbake! These bars are definitely better underbaked by just a few minutes rather than being overbaked so watch them carefully. Let cool completely on a wire rack before slicing into squares.



OREO CHEESECAKE BITES



I love cheesecake. And I love [Oreo cheesecake](#). What could be better than combining my favorite components into bite-sized form drizzled with white and dark chocolate? Pure heaven, my friends. Pure heaven.

- YIELD: MAKES 36 OR MORE BITES, DEPENDING ON SIZE -

INGREDIENTS:

36 Oreo Cookies, divided
1/4 cup (4 tablespoons) butter
4 packages (8-ounces each) cream cheese, softened
1 cup granulated sugar
1 cup sour cream
1 teaspoon vanilla
4 large eggs
4 ounces semisweet chocolate
4 ounces white chocolate

DIRECTIONS:

Preheat the oven to 325°F. Line a 9×13-inch baking pan with foil, with ends extending over sides. Finely crush 24 Oreo cookies. Melt 1/4 cup butter; mix with crumbs. Press onto bottom of prepared pan.

In a large bowl, beat the cream cheese and sugar with mixer until blended. Add sour cream and vanilla; mix well. Add eggs, one at a time, beating after each just until blended. Chop remaining cookies. Gently stir into batter; pour over crust.

Bake the cheesecake for about 35-40 minutes or until the sides are set and the center is almost set. Cool completely on a wire rack in the pan.

When the cheesecake is completely cooled, cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 2 hours. When chilled, remove the cheesecake using the foil overhang and cut the cheesecake into bite-sized pieces. Place the cheesecake bites on a wax or parchment paper-lined baking tray. Melt the semisweet chocolate and white chocolate in separate bowls (I use the microwave on 50% power, stirring frequently). Pour the melted chocolate into a ziploc bag, one for the semisweet chocolate, one for the white chocolate. Snip a small corner off the corner of the bag and drizzle the chocolate over the cheesecake bars. Chill the bars until ready to serve. Alternately, the drizzled bites can be frozen in an airtight container for up to a month. Let them defrost in the refrigerator and serve chilled.

CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIE DOUGH CHEESECAKE

Mel's
KITCHEN CAFE

Smooth, creamy, decadent cheesecake studded with sweet morsels of cookie dough and bursts of mini chocolate chips. All atop a chocolatey, buttery crust and garnished with sweetened whipped cream and more chocolate chips. Hands down one of the best cheesecakes I've ever tasted!

- YIELD: MAKES 1 CHEESECAKE -

Note: This cheesecake, like any good, baked cheesecake, tastes best after being refrigerated overnight.

INGREDIENTS:

CRUST:

4 tablespoons butter, melted
2 1/2 cups chocolate cookie crumbs (I like to use chocolate Teddy Grahams but you could use any chocolate wafer cookie or even Oreos)

FILLING:

4 (8-ounce) blocks cream cheese, softened to room temperature
1 cup sugar
4 large eggs
1 teaspoon all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 cup sour cream (I used light and it worked just fine)

COOKIE DOUGH:

1/2 cup butter, softened
1/2 cup sugar
1/2 cup packed light brown sugar
2 tablespoon water or milk
2 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 cup all-purpose flour
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 cup mini chocolate chips
An additional 1 cup mini chocolate chips to fold into the batter with the cookie dough balls

GARNISH:

1 cup heavy whipping cream, whipped to stiff peaks (add 1 tablespoon powdered sugar while whipping if you like a bit of extra sweetness)
Mini chocolate chips, for sprinkling

FOR THE COOKIE DOUGH:

In a medium bowl, combine the butter and sugars for the cookie dough. Add the water (or milk), vanilla and blend. Mix in the flour, salt and the chocolate chips. The dough will be fairly soft. Gently roll the dough into small balls (about a teaspoon size, maybe a bit larger) and place them on a wax paper lined plate or baking sheet. Place them in the freezer to harden while making the rest of the cheesecake.

FOR THE CRUST:

Lightly grease the bottom and sides of a 10-inch springform pan. In a medium bowl, combine the butter with the chocolate cookie crumbs (you could easily use a food processor to crush the cookies and incorporate the butter). Press onto the bottom and about halfway up the sides of the prepared pan.

FOR THE CHEESECAKE:

Using an electric mixer on high speed, beat the cream cheese, sugar, eggs and flour until smooth. Add the vanilla and sour cream and mix just until blended. Be careful not to overmix - incorporating too much air into the batter can contribute to a cheesecake cracking on top during baking.

Pour half the batter into the prepared crust. Gently stir in the cookie dough balls and the additional 1 cup mini chocolate chips into the remaining batter. Pour into the pan, spreading the batter to the sides of the pan and evening it out across the top (it is ok to see bumps of cookie dough here and there, smooth it the best you can). Bake the cheesecake at 325 degrees for one hour. Turn off the oven and prop the door open several inches. Let the cake sit in the oven for an additional 30 minutes. Remove the cake from the oven and let it cool completely on a wire rack. Refrigerate until chilled (ideally, overnight). To serve, cut into slices and top with whipped cream and mini chocolate chips.



CINNAMON ROLL CAKE



Using one of my very, [very favorite {ultra-simple} cakes](#) as the base, dollops of buttery cinnamon and sugar are swirled into the cake batter before baking and then drizzled with a sweet glaze after baking. The silky glaze soaks into all the sticky crevices of gooey cinnamon and sugar, and served warm, it is like cakey cinnamon roll nirvana.

- YIELD: MAKES A 9X13-INCH PAN OF CAKE (9-12 SERVINGS) -

INGREDIENTS:

CAKE:

2 cups all-purpose flour
1 1/2 cups granulated sugar
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
2 teaspoons baking powder
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 1/3 cups light or regular sour cream
2/3 cup butter, softened
1 teaspoon vanilla
3 large eggs

CINNAMON SWIRL:

3/4 cup butter, softened
3/4 cup light brown sugar
1 tablespoon flour
1 tablespoon ground cinnamon

GLAZE:

2 cups powdered sugar
4-5 tablespoons milk
1/2 teaspoon vanilla

DIRECTIONS:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Lightly grease a 9X13-inch baking pan with nonstick cooking spray and set aside.

In a large bowl, combine all the cake batter ingredients and mix well. Spread the batter evenly in the prepared pan.

In a small bowl, stir together the butter, light brown sugar, flour and cinnamon for the swirl mixture. The butter should be soft enough to make a smooth (but not soupy) mixture. Drop the cinnamon/butter mixture by tablespoons over the cake batter. Make sure to get a few dollops close to the edges (otherwise the cake bakes up and squeezes all the cinnamon sugar mixture to the middle).

Using a butter knife, swirl the cinnamon mixture into the cake batter, reaching all the way to the edges and pulling in to create swirls from edge to edge. Don't overswirl - just enough to create generous loops of cinnamon and sugar throughout the cake batter.

Bake the cake for 30-32 minutes until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean or with a few moist crumbs.

For the glaze, whisk together the powdered sugar, milk and vanilla until smooth. Pour evenly over the cake while it is still warm within 5-10 minutes of removing from the oven.

Serve the cake warm or at room temperature (it can be reheated slightly as individual servings in the microwave and tastes just lovely warmed up like that), or it is absolutely insane served warm with a scoop of vanilla ice cream!

CHOCOLATE FROSTED BROWNIES

Mel's
KITCHEN CAFE

This was the winning combination of brownie and frosting. The brownies are dense and chewy and deliciously wild with chocolate flavor while the ethereal frosting adds a wonderful delicate, creamy chocolate layer.

- YIELD: MAKES 12-16 BROWNIES -

Note: This recipe can be doubled for a 9X13-inch pan. Bake for about 5 minutes less than the recipe states below and increase as needed while you check for doneness (cause there's nothing worse than an overcooked brownie).

FOR THE BROWNIES:

1/2 cup butter
3 ounces unsweetened chocolate chopped
(about 1/2 cup)
1/2 cup granulated sugar
1/2 cup light brown sugar
2 large eggs
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/2 cup semisweet chocolate chips
3/4 cup all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/4 teaspoon salt

FOR THE FROSTING:

6 tablespoons butter, at room
temperature
1/4 cup unsweetened cocoa powder
1/8 teaspoon salt
1 1/4 cups powdered sugar
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
3-5 tablespoon milk or cream

DIRECTIONS:

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Line an 8-inch-square baking dish with foil, letting the excess hang over the edges (this helps to make "handles" for lifting out the brownies after they have cooled). Lightly grease the foil; set aside.

In a medium-size microwave-safe bowl, combine the chocolate and butter for the brownies. Microwave for 1-minute increments at 50% power, stirring in between, until the chocolate and butter are melted and smooth. Whisk in the granulated and brown sugars. Whisk in the eggs and the vanilla extract. Add the flour, baking powder and salt. Fold the dry ingredients into the chocolate mixture with a rubber spatula until combined. Stir in the chocolate chips.

Pour the batter into the prepared pan and bake for 25-30 minutes, until a thin knife or toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean or with a few moist crumbs. Remove the brownies from the oven and allow them to cool completely.

For the frosting, using an electric mixer (handheld or stand mixer), cream together the butter, cocoa powder, and salt on medium speed for about 2-3 minutes. Scrape down the sides of the bowl and add the powdered sugar. Mix on low speed to incorporate the sugar. Add the vanilla and milk, starting with a couple tablespoons and adding more as needed to adjust the consistency. Increase the mixer speed to medium-high, beating until smooth and fluffy.

Spread the frosting onto the cooled brownies. Store the brownies in an airtight container, or tightly wrapped, at room temperature or in the refrigerator (I highly, highly, highly prefer my brownies chilled in case you care) for 3-5 days.



CLASSIC OATMEAL CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES



If you are looking for a straight-up classic oatmeal chocolate chip cookie with standard ingredients, try this one. The cookie is buttery and soft and if it is any indication of how much I like this recipe, this is still one of my great go-to cookies. I nearly always have them in the freezer waiting for little hands to grab, warm up for a few seconds and eat. A truly classic cookie!

- YIELD: MAKES 2 TO 3 DOZEN COOKIES -

Note: I much prefer old-fashioned oats in this recipe for texture and taste but you can use quick oats if it's all you have. FYI: if using quick oats, the cookies won't flatten into a pretty cookie shape (they'll stay kind of mounded up) like with the old-fashioned oats so you may consider decreasing the amount slightly.

INGREDIENTS:

1 cup (2 sticks) butter, softened to room temperature
 1 cup packed light brown sugar
 1 cup granulated sugar
 2 large eggs
 1 teaspoon vanilla
 1 teaspoon baking soda
 1 teaspoon baking powder
 1 teaspoon salt
 2 cups all-purpose flour
 2 3/4 cups old-fashioned rolled oats
 2 cups chocolate chips

DIRECTIONS:

Cream together the butter and sugars. Add eggs and vanilla. Beat until light and fluffy. Add baking soda, powder, and salt and mix. Add flour, oatmeal and chocolate chips. Mix until combined.

Bake at 350 degrees for 10-12 minutes.