

BREAD, or CAKE?

Both being carbohydrate-heavy baked goods (though breads may be cooked in various ways), and with the popularity of 'quick breads' and loaf cakes, the terms 'bread' and 'cake' are not always distinct. People, mistakenly, may use them interchangeably, for certain foods. While it is difficult to come up with a specific definition for each, the two foods are actually very different, and distinguishing between them is important. Invariably, distinguishing them is a complex matter, and several factors contribute to any food being defined as either one.



1. INGREDIENTS

A bread has flour and water as its primary ingredients, with flour being the main constituent. Most breads also include a leavening agent. Some breads may include salt, a small amount of milk, or a little oil/butter. On the other hand, a cake will include flour, but this usually shares the title of 'main ingredient' with a form of fat, and sugar. Cakes also include some type of protein, be this eggs, milk, or yogurt. The higher ratio of fat and sugar means breads are typically drier and leaner.

3. PREPARATION

Because breads generally have fewer, and simpler, ingredients, preparing a bread normally involves fewer steps. The ingredients are usually all mixed in one, or at least the flour and liquid. Cakes involve a much more graduated process, as air needs to be incorporated, and more ingredients are involved. There are various methods to cake making, most notably the creaming method, in which the fat and sugar are beaten together first, and then the dry and wet ingredients are incorporated alternately, ensuring a smoother, well integrated batter, without any pockets of flour.

2. LEAVENING AND GLUTEN

Cakes are leavened via chemical methods, for example baking soda and/or baking powder. This type of leavening is quick and results in lots of little holes, producing a uniform 'soft' texture. Air is also incorporated in most cake batters through creaming butter and sugar. On the other hand, breads have chewy textures (if leavened, the chewiness comes from the crust, and the inner texture is open, if not leavened, the overall bread is chewy), and so if they are leavened, yeast is used. Time is required for fermentation to occur and carbon dioxide to be produced, which creates the bigger, uneven holes in the bread.



Furthermore, bread flour has a high gluten content—kneading the bread dough aligns the gluten strands to give bread the dough structure that make it chewy and 'bread-y'. In contrast, cake flour contains very little gluten, and cake recipes often ask you to 'mix until just incorporated' to prevent gluten formation.

4. TASTE AND INTENT

Cakes are sweet, and typically eaten as a dessert or treat. Because of the differences in ingredients, cakes are higher in calorie density too. In addition, cakes may be decorated with icing, and are often highly flavoured. Cakes come in all shapes and sizes. They are eaten as they are, or sometimes as part of a bigger dessert, with ice cream or cream.

Bread, however, is generally savoury, though may sometimes be slightly sweet (in these cases, the sugar content is still far less than in a cake). They are more of a staple part of a diet, and tend to be plainer. They are usually lower in calories. Breads are often baked in loaves (ignoring unleavened bread), and tend to be eaten with a spread such as butter.

EXAMPLES:



To illustrate the interplay between the factors highlighted, I have provided some examples of how we come to define some of the more controversial ‘grey area’ foods, which at first may seem to be both a bread and a cake. A common reason behind this confusion is the name given to the food, however it is important to remember that names are often given to things because of physical appearance or cultural significance, rather than for technical classification. This applies in other contexts too—consider the scientific Latin name for a flower, versus the name we know it as, for example, Spanish bluebells are ‘hyacinthoids hispanica’, and the red hot poker plant is actually ‘kniphofia uvaria’.

MALT LOAF : Because of its name and its loaf shape, malt loaf can appear at first to be a bread. To add to the confusion, some people actually spread butter on it. However, malt loaf is actually a cake, and several factors indicate this. Firstly, it is very sweet, and despite sometimes being eaten with butter, is also often eaten plain. Part of the reasoning behind this is that it is rich and highly flavoured (as it contains a large amount of dried fruit). It is often described as being ‘sticky’ and ‘gooey’.

Secondly, the batter has a high volume of sugar (provided through malt extract as well as actual sugar), roughly equal to the amount of flour, and the batter also contains eggs. In addition, malt loaf uses baking powder, a chemical leavening agent.



BANANA BREAD: Banana bread is a good example of the group of baked goods called quick breads, which are any dough or batter that is baked in a loaf tin while utilising a chemical leavening agent. ‘Quick breads’ may be a bread or cake, depending on the other factors at hand. They are a common source of confusion because of the term ‘bread’!

Banana bread is, definitively, a cake. Like other cakes, it uses butter, sugar, and eggs as well as flour, as its main ingredients. While banana bread is lower in sugar than most cakes, it is still very sweet, partly due to the mashed bananas that flavour it. Banana bread is also often eaten plain, because of the strong banana flavour, though it can be buttered. It also relies on chemical leavening agents, and has a dense but moist, even crumb, with no large holes. It is not chewy or glutinous.

(BRITISH) TEACAKES: Despite having the word ‘cake’ in their name, teacakes are a type of bread. They commonly produce controversy—not helped by the inclusion of raisins in their recipe, which makes them sweet. However, their basic ingredients are milk and flour (a high-gluten, bread flour), and yeast is used to leaven them. Kneading is an important step in their preparation, as it gives them their characteristic chewy, glutinous bread texture.

Teacakes also do not contain any egg, and not usually any butter or sugar. In recent years, a little sugar is sometimes added to the dough, but this is very minimal (normally less than a tenth of the amount of flour).

Finally, teacakes are traditionally served with butter.

Note the difference between two dried-fruit-flavoured foods—malt loaf is rich and dense because of the amount of dried fruit and sugar, while teacakes have a much smaller ratio of dried fruit to other ingredients, and little to no sugar.

