

*Mix a pancake,
Stir a pancake,
Pop it in the pan,
Fry the pancake,
Toss the pancake,
Catch it if you can*

When Christina Rossetti (1830-94) wrote this nursery rhyme 'Shrove Tuesday' or Pancake Day was a day of celebration. 'Shrove' refers to the confessing of sins (Shriving) and precedes Ash Wednesday the beginning of Lent. Lent for the Christian, is a time for reflection and historically a time for fasting. Shrove Tuesday was the last times to feast and to use up foods that were not eaten in Lent: milk, eggs and fats fell into this category and so you have most of the ingredients for pancakes. The French use the name Mardi Gras, which means Fat Tuesday and comes from the need to abstain from fats. Shrove Tuesday means that spring is coming and there are only 47 days until chocolate on Easter Sunday!

Dame Deirdre Hutton, the Chair of the Food Standards Agency, recently told us that, 'processed food is here to stay'. We can expect food manufacturers to cash in on this and produce traditional foods in packet form. I have spied pancake mixes and readymade crepes in the supermarkets; you can even find a plastic lemon to squirt the juice from. BUT this isn't what Pancake Day is all about and if you are after taste, a homemade pancake made from free-range eggs just can't be beaten .

Pancake recipes use simple, raw ingredients: eggs, milk, flour and fat. Mastering batter making is a great culinary skill but fluffy Yorkshire puds will come with practice. Early English recipes use ale or wine as well as milk. Today pancakes can be international in flavour. In France streets are vanilla crepes scented, Americans breakfast on theirs and Canadians add maple syrup. Russians enjoy Blinis using buckwheat flour and the Jews eat crisp Blintzes with sour cream and cinnamon. Savoury fillings work too. Crepes Aux fruits-de-Mer for those of you by the sea - in Angus Arbroath Smokie can't be beaten. The Italians favour ricotta and spinach. **Pancakes are so versatile.** They have been enjoyed for centuries, now is the time to experiment and excite your taste buds. Pancakes freeze well and can be refrigerated for 4-5 days. They are a great storage place for leftovers too.

Pancake Day (February 20th) tempts everyone into the kitchen. Pancake making time is ideal chattering time. Lent is coming. You might discuss what it is all about –why do people give things up? Discuss the raw ingredients: how was the flour milled, what is butter is made of. Consider planning an 'eggpedition' collecting the eggs that are going into the pancakes.

Pancake races are traditional and actually originated over five hundred years ago. A lady heard the 'Shriving Bell' and rushed to the church still holding her frying pan. If Pancake Day is fine it might be less messy to follow her example and practice tossing pancake outside. You can have tossing races around the garden.

Here are a few helpful hints for Pancake Success:

The real answer lies in the batter. Some suggest using half milk and half iced water, others allow the batter to rest in the fridge overnight. But the key is 'Practice makes perfect'. A not-too-thick batter that has rested for half an hour works for us.

Don't worry if your first effort is less than perfect, they'll improve as you progress. It is fun sneaking early samples anyway! Don't wash the pan between pancakes.

Some writers suggest never using your pancake pan, for anything else and never washing it. I find that an even-bottomed frying pan is the answer.

Keep the pancakes warm as you cook along. For crisp pancakes keep them in a warm oven. For soggy ones, place them between two plates over some boiling water.

The famous cookery writer Mrs Beeton has a word on pancake success: 'Pour only a small quantity of batter, and so making the pancakes thin, the necessity of turning them (an operation rather difficult to unskillful cooks) is obviated' A final word from a wartime cookery pamphlet concurs with the doyenne.

'Use a very small frying-pan and make the pancakes very thin'.

Get tossing and shape your pancakes to rolls, cornets, triangles or pancake surprise parcels.

Last September I helped a group of primary school children make pancakes for a lunch in the Guildhall in York, as a part of the York Food Festival, even the lady mayor came to help us. The children with help from their teachers, made enough pancakes to feed 35 guests – now there is a challenge for you. Lili has kept with the theme and come up with a Lemony Scotch pancake recipe.