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Cathead Biscuits

Makes about 9

My friend and colleague Dr. Marcie Cohen Ferris is a professor in the Department of American Studies at the University of North Carolina. Her research and teaching interests include Southern history and culture—particularly the foodways and material culture of the American South and the history of the Jewish South. In her excellent book *The Edible South* she writes, “In contemporary worlds of popular and consumer culture, Southern food has become untethered from the complex historical narrative responsible for this cuisine. Think of buckets of Southern fried chicken and cathead biscuits like culinary spacecraft set adrift from the mother ship of southern history, culture, and experience.” I wholeheartedly agree. Many people outside the South think all Southern food is unhealthy and/or fried.

The term *cathead biscuit* is an authentic one, indicating that it’s a biscuit as large as a cat’s head, and a phrase my grandfather once used. This extra-large biscuit would not have been the norm on the everyday table, but it has become the standard size for fast-food biscuits. Ferris continues, “Fried chicken, biscuits, and sweet tea—the icons of Southern food—have become so ‘super-sized,’ enriched, sweetened, and filled with butter that they are almost unrecognizable to native Southerners.” *This* cathead biscuit is the real deal.

There are a few secrets to a tender biscuit: First, flours vary in their protein levels. Reach for a low-protein flour for light-as-air biscuits. After that, you want cold butter—when the cold butter is transferred to the hot oven it melts and produces steam, which helps produce flaky biscuits. Lastly, avoid overworking the dough, which activates the gluten and will produce a tough, heavy biscuit. The perfect biscuit should be golden brown and slightly crisp on the outside, with a light, airy interior.

4 cups White Lily or other Southern all-purpose flour, or cake flour (not self-rising), plus more for rolling out
2 tablespoons baking powder
2 teaspoons fine sea salt
8 tablespoons (½ cup) cold unsalted butter, cut into cubes and chilled
2 cups buttermilk

1. Heat the oven to 500°F. Line a baking sheet with a silicone baking mat. (You can also bake the biscuits on an ungreased baking sheet.)
2. In a bowl, combine the flour, baking powder, and salt. Using a pastry blender or two knives, cut the butter into the flour mixture until it resembles coarse meal. Pour in the buttermilk and mix until just barely combined. It will be a shaggy mass. (Alternatively, you can mix the dough in a food processor: Pulse to combine the flour, baking powder, and salt.)
3. Add the butter and pulse until it resembles coarse meal. Pour in the buttermilk through the feed tube and pulse until just barely combined. It will be a shaggy mass.)
4. Turn the shaggy mass out onto a lightly floured surface. Knead lightly, using the heel of your hand to compress and push the dough away from you, then fold it back over itself. Give the dough a small turn and repeat four or five times. (It’s not yeast bread; you want to just barely activate the gluten, not overwork it.)



5. Using a lightly floured rolling pin, roll the dough out 1 inch thick. Cut out rounds of dough with a 3½-inch round cutter dipped in flour; press the cutter straight down without twisting so the biscuits will rise evenly when baked.
6. Place the biscuits on the prepared baking sheet. If the biscuits are baked close together, the sides will be tender. If the biscuits are baked farther apart, the sides will be crisp. (I always say biscuits are like people: If you are close to your neighbor, you will be tender, and if you aren't close to your neighbor, you will be crisp!)
7. Once you've punched out the first round from the dough, you can reroll the scraps. However, do not simply roll them into a ball; this will create a knot of gluten strands. Instead, place the pieces one on top of the other in layers. Then roll out and repeat punching out the biscuits.
8. Bake until golden brown, 10 to 12 minutes. Transfer to a rack to cool just slightly. Serve warm.

Wheat flour contains two proteins, glutenin and gliadin. Gluten is a strong and elastic sheet produced by these proteins by the combination of moisture and motion. When you combine flour with liquid, the proteins produce gluten. Gluten gives structure and chewiness to yeast breads, but you don't want to develop gluten in tender biscuits.

Photo Captions: (photos not provided)

1. Using a pastry blender, cut the chilled cubed butter into the flour mixture. The butter coats the flour and will prevent the absorption of moisture, therefore lessening the activation of the gluten.
2. Stop cutting when the butter bits are about the size of small peas. The butter will melt during baking, creating pockets of steam that give biscuits their flakiness.
3. Add the buttermilk and stir to combine, but do not stir until it is a smooth dough. You don't want to overwork the dough and activate the gluten.
4. Turn the shaggy mass out onto a floured work surface. Flour is your friend!
5. Using a bench scraper, turn the dough a few times until it starts to come together.
6. Shape the dough into a rectangle. Try not to touch the dough with your warm hands so the butter stays cold.
7. Using a floured rolling pin, start at the middle of the dough and roll backward without coming off the edge. Then start in the middle of the dough and roll forward without coming off the edge. This will help keep the dough even.
8. Using your bench scraper, rotate the dough so it does not stick to the work surface. Add more flour, if needed.
9. Using a floured circular cutter, punch out the biscuits. Do not twist as you punch, as that would seal the edges and possibly inhibit the biscuit's rise.
10. Place the biscuits on the baking sheet. If the biscuits touch, the sides will be soft and tender. If they do not touch, the sides will be crispier.
11. Do not ball the scraps of dough in a knot. Instead, layer the scraps and pat them together. Reroll following the same procedure and punch out the remaining biscuits.
12. The biscuits are ready for the oven! A very hot oven is essential to create the biscuits' ideal texture inside and out.



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