

Icing Upgrade

Barb Evans, CMSA, IL

Is it time to give your icing an upgrade? We tend to get comfortable with what we know, but I challenge you to step out of your comfort zone and take your icing to the next level. Be sure to make your changes on a cake you can afford to experiment on. Sharpen your beaters and rev up your mixer motor and let's get mixing.

If you are using an American buttercream with shortening as your fat component, you can make a big change in your frosting by simply changing one ingredient. One of the easiest changes to make is to substitute half or all of the shortening for butter, you will be amazed what a difference this will make. If you are using a standard shortening consider changing to high ratio shortening such as Sweetex or SweetexZ with zero trans fats. The high ratio shortening will avoid the greasy feeling you get with shortening. It can be a little hard to find but if you have a decorating store or a restaurant supply you may have success. It is even available online. The shortening will usually come in a 50 pound box so you might want to find a friend to share with. In keeping with the subject of fats, there are also different types of butter with various levels of fat, salt and coloring. Simply changing the type of butter you are using will change the end result of your icing. Keep in mind your weather will have an effect on the recipe you use. In the winter you may want to increase the amount of butter, decrease both the shortening and the powdered sugar. The powdered sugar is reduced to keep the icing to a point where it will crust but not crack. If your icing cracks easily you have too high of a ratio of sugar to fat.

An obvious change you can make is the type of flavoring you use. I tend to be a purist and only use vanilla in my regular buttercream icing but there are many options for flavoring. Taking a look at vanilla, we have several choices; clear vanilla, artificial vanilla, pure vanilla, double strength, powdered, vanilla sugar, vanilla paste and the list goes. Upgrading to a better vanilla is a great step. There are many other flavorings used in buttercream; oils, purees, liquors, emulsions just to name a few. Experiment with adding a new flavor next time you make a buttercream but remember a little goes a long way. Do you add salt to your icing? Try it, you might like it! Here again, a little will do.

Ganache is an absolute favorite of mine when it comes to frosting. Have you ever iced a cupcake with a whipped ganache? Yum! Ganache is basically a mixture

of chocolate and cream in varying ratios. You can ice your cake with a firm ganache that will be covered with fondant by using a ratio of 1.5 pounds of chopped chocolate to 8 oz. of heavy whipping cream. If we go to the other extreme, use a ratio of 12 oz. of chopped chocolate to 14 oz. of heavy whipping cream for the whipped cupcake icing. For both recipes, chop the chocolate, (a food processor works well) bring the whipping cream to a boil and pour over the chocolate. Give the mixture one stir and then let it sit for a minute to finish melting the chocolate, then use a whisk to emulsify the mixture. To ice the cake with ganache, let the ganache cool and then apply with a spatula. For the whipped ganache version, place the ganache in a refrigerator until the mixture is chilled but still has some movement. Place in your mixer with the whip and mix on medium speed until the mixture looks like whipped cream (watch it very closely it will over-whip easily). Often butter or flavorings will be added to ganache. An added note: did you know if you rinse your pan with water before boiling the cream, the cream will not stick to the bottom of the pan?

It's funny that we often think of the American's being the modern masters of buttercream and our Australian and European friends for being the modern masters of royal icing and fondant. However, let's take a look at these favorite buttercream recipes from our European friends: Italian, French and Swiss If you have never tried any of these types of buttercream, it is time!!! You are missing out! Please note all three of these recipes will need to be refrigerated and do not crust, but it is worth the effort.

Italian Buttercream

16 oz (450 g) granulated sugar (scant 2 cups)
4 oz (112 g) water (scant ½ cup)
8 oz (225 g) egg white at room temperature (about 5)
20 oz (562 g) butter at room temperature (4 ½ sticks)
1 tsp. vanilla

Optional: to make chocolate add 10% of total weight in melted (but not hot) dark chocolate. Add a small amount of icing to chocolate first and blend, then add back to buttercream.

Place egg whites in a grease free bowl and beat to a fairly stiff peak using the whisk attachment. At the same time, heat sugar and water to 240°. Use pastry brush to wash down sides if there is sugar on the side of the pan. Turn mixer to medium-low speed and stream in the

syrup taking care not to let the syrup splash on the side of the bowl (this will make sugar crystals in your icing). Continue to mix on medium speed until bottom of bowl has come to room temperature (this may take up to 15 minutes). Slowly add the butter cut into pats, waiting for the last butter to become incorporated before adding more. Continue to blend until icing becomes light and smooth. This icing will fool you. It will look like it is not going to come together and then all of the sudden it is perfect, be patient. Add 1 tsp vanilla. Use immediately.

To re-whip chilled frosting: take a small portion of icing, place in the microwave until liquid. Beat into chilled icing.

French Buttercream

12 oz granulated sugar
2.4 oz water
3 oz egg yolks at room temperature
16 oz. butter at room temperature
1 tsp. vanilla

Place eggs in a bowl and using a whisk attachment and beat until they are thick and very light. At the same time, heat sugar and water to 240° (do not exceed or reduce temp). Use pastry brush to wash down sides if there is sugar on the side of the pan. Turn mixer to medium-low speed and stream in the syrup taking care not to let the syrup splash on the side of the bowl (this will make sugar crystals in your icing). Continue to mix on medium speed until bottom of bowl has come to room temperature (this may take up to 15 minutes). Slowly add the butter cut into pats, waiting for the last butter to become incorporated before adding more. Continue to blend until icing becomes light and smooth. Add 1 tsp vanilla. Use immediately.

Swiss Meringue

8oz (227g) egg white at room temperature (2parts)
12oz (340g) granulated sugar (3 parts)
16oz. (453g) butter (4 parts)
1 tsp. vanilla

Place egg whites and sugar in a mixing bowl that can be used over a double boiler and used for beating the icing. Over double boiler heat until sugar dissolves completely to about 110°. Stir gently to avoid incorporating air as this will help sugar dissolve. When sugar dissolves, remove from heat and beat to stiff peak. Slowly add butter in chunks until completely incorporated.

Are you looking for a super-smooth buttercream? This fool-proof method can be used with any icing. Place your icing in the mixer using a paddle, now fill up the

bowl – all the way to the top but not overflowing. The only part of the paddle you should be able to see is the shank connecting to the mixer. Run your mixer on medium speed for 3-5 minutes and magically you will have super smooth icing. This will even work with royal icing. We don't usually need that much royal – but it will work regardless.

To make this article complete I could not leave out Cream Cheese Icing or the traditional Red Velvet Cake Icing. I have to admit I'm not a fan of Red Velvet Cake, but the icing is divine.

Cream Cheese Icing

8 oz. package of cream cheese (room temperature)
1 stick of butter (room temperature)
1 lb of powdered sugar
1 tsp. vanilla extract

Mix the cream cheese until smooth and then add the butter, combine. Add the sugar and vanilla and mix until fluffy.

Classic Red Velvet Icing

1 cup whole milk
¼ cup flour
1 tsp. vanilla
1 cup butter
1 cup granulated sugar

The milk and flour are mixed and cooked to a paste consistency. To do this without any lumps place the milk and flour in a microwave safe bowl and mix well with a whisk. Cook in the microwave stirring well with a whisk every 30 seconds until the mixture thickens almost to a paste (this took about 2 ½ minutes in my fairly powerful microwave). Let the mixture cool to room temperature and add the vanilla.

In a mixing bowl cream the sugar and butter, beat until fluffy. Add the flour mixture a little at a time and mix thoroughly.

I hope I have challenged you to take your icing to the next level - or at least get a little creative. Happy decorating!

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