

All-Occasion Vanilla Cupcakes

We all need a basic vanilla cupcake recipe. For birthdays, showers, bake sales, life. Like the white disco suit from “Saturday Night Fever,” you can bedazzle these as much or as little as you want. This recipe is all about changing it up – try swapping out the neutral oil for a more flavorful one (think walnut, almond or a fruity olive) or substituting a different extract for the vanilla in the cake recipe. Same goes for the frosting – change out the milk for coffee, orange juice, maple syrup or rum. You’re welcome.

See Cook’s Note for frostings to take your cupcakes from plain to elaborate.

Ingredients

for the cupcakes

1½ cups all-purpose flour
1 cup granulated sugar
1/2 teaspoon fine salt
6 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened and cut into 1 tablespoon pieces
1/2 cup whole milk
2 large eggs
2 tablespoons neutral oil, such as canola, grapeseed or safflower seed
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
1½ teaspoons baking powder, preferably aluminum-free

for the vanilla buttercream frosting

4 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
2 cups confectioners’ sugar
1 pinch fine salt
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
2 to 4 tablespoons whole milk
Colored sugars, sprinkles, or other decorations, optional

special equipment

12-cup standard-size muffin tin (each cup 2½ by 1¼ inches) with 12 paper or foil liners
Hand mixer
Wire cooling rack

Directions

for the cupcakes

Have all ingredients at room temperature. Line a 12-cup standard size muffin tin with paper or foil liners. Preheat oven to 350 degrees with a rack in the middle position.

In a large bowl, mix flour, granulated sugar and salt with a hand mixer at its lowest speed until thoroughly combined, about 1 minute. Add butter, milk, eggs, oil, and vanilla to dry ingredients and beat on low speed for 1 to 2 minutes. Scrape down sides of bowl, then beat on high speed until very smooth and light, about 2 minutes. Scrape sides of bowl again and sprinkle baking powder over the batter. Mix on low speed for 1 minute, or until baking powder has been smoothly incorporated into batter.

Divide batter evenly among the 12 cups, filling each about 2/3 of the way up. Bake until the cupcake tops are light golden and a toothpick comes out clean, 20 to 24 minutes.

Let cupcakes cool in pan on a wire rack for 5 minutes, then transfer directly to a wire rack to cool completely before frosting.

for the vanilla buttercream frosting

Beat the butter until smooth in a large bowl, using a mixer on medium speed. Gradually add the confectioner's sugar and salt, beating until well mixed. Add the vanilla and 2 tablespoons of the milk, continuing to beat until fluffy. Add more milk, a teaspoon at a time, until the frosting is a spreadable consistency.

Spread or pipe frosting on cooled cupcakes and decorate as desired.

Cook's Notes

Try a few of these flavorings to put a spin on the basic vanilla buttercream frosting.

Lemon frosting: Omit the vanilla and replace the milk with freshly squeezed lemon juice. Stir in 1/2 teaspoon finely grated lemon zest to the finished frosting. Garnish frosted cupcakes with additional grated lemon zest, if desired.

Dark chocolate frosting: Melt 3 ounces unsweetened chocolate and cool completely. Beat cooled chocolate into butter, then continue with recipe as written.

Coconut frosting: Replace milk with well-shaken coconut milk. Stir in 2/3 cup sweetened flaked coconut to the finished frosting. Garnish frosted cupcakes with additional coconut, if desired.

total time: 1 hour 40 minutes

active prep: 20 minutes

serves: 12

difficulty: *easy*