

SOUTHERN SNACKING

Common Leaveners and Why They Work



Baking Soda

Sodium bicarbonate—baking soda—produces carbon dioxide when activated with moist, acidic ingredients like buttermilk, lemon juice, or sour cream. This gas physically causes batters to rise, and the heat of the oven sets the risen batter. Use too little and you don't get enough lift; use too much and the bubbles will burst, leaving your baked goods flat. Baking soda also makes doughs more alkaline, which encourages browning.



Baking Powder

Baking powder is a combination of baking soda, acid salt (such as cream of tartar), and cornstarch. Since baking powder contains acid already, it only needs moisture to activate. (The cornstarch prevents the other two active ingredients from reacting with moisture in the air.) We recommend using double-acting baking powder, which reacts immediately when mixed with liquid and then a second time when exposed to heat. Date your baking powder when you open it; its leavening power declines over time. Be sure to store it in a dry, cool place.



Beer

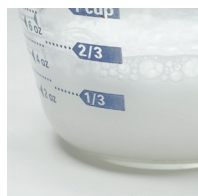
Beer's carbonation makes it a good choice for leavening batters for fried onion rings and tempura-style vegetables. The carbon dioxide bubbles add lift to the batter as they escape and evaporate in the hot oil environment. Beer's acidity also keeps these batters tender, since the low pH inhibits gluten formation. Non-alcoholic beers are a great substitute if you want beer flavor without the alcohol.



Seltzer

Like beer, seltzer is full of bubbles that can add lift to foods. We've used seltzer in place of whipped egg whites in waffle recipes and in batters for shrimp tempura and crab fritters. It's important to use fresh, highly carbonated unflavored seltzer or club soda in recipes. Sparkling waters like Perrier don't have the same amount of carbonation and will cause your recipe to fall flat.

Putting Baking Powder to the Test



Since baking powder loses its ability to produce carbon dioxide over time, we suggest that you date your baking powder when you open the can. We've found that the leavening power declines sharply after 6 months and results in underwhelming (and underinflated) baked goods.

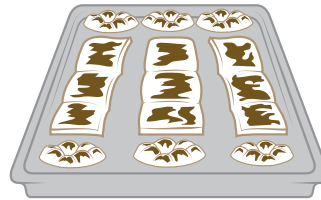
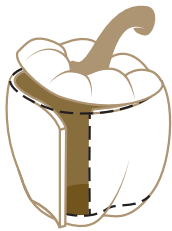
Here's a quick test: Add 1 teaspoon of baking powder to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of warm water. If it fizzes energetically, then it's still usable and active.

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Roasted Bell Peppers

Makes 1½ cups

Cooking times will vary depending on the broiler and the thickness of the bell pepper walls, so watch the bell peppers carefully as they cook. Green bell peppers retain some bitterness even when roasted and so are best used as a complement to sweeter red, yellow, and orange bell peppers.



1. Line rimmed baking sheet with aluminum foil and spray with vegetable oil spray. Slice ½ inch from tops and bottoms of 3 large bell peppers (about 1½ pounds). Gently remove stems from tops. Twist and pull out each core, using knife to loosen at edges if necessary. Cut slit down 1 side of each bell pepper.

2. Turn each bell pepper skin side down and gently press so it opens to create long strip. Slide knife along insides of bell peppers to remove remaining ribs and seeds.

3. Arrange bell pepper strips, tops, and bottoms skin side up on prepared sheet and flatten all pieces with your hand. Adjust oven rack 3 to 4 inches from broiler element and heat broiler. Broil until skin is puffed and most of surface is well charred, 10 to 13 minutes, rotating sheet halfway through broiling.

4. Using tongs, pile bell peppers in center of foil. Gather foil over bell peppers and crimp to form pouch. Let steam for 10 minutes. Open foil packet and spread out bell peppers. When cool enough to handle, peel bell peppers and discard skins. (Bell peppers can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.)