

Would your baking measure up to a masterclass with Mary Berry?

The queen of *The Great British Bake Off*, Mary Berry, shares some of her culinary secrets with Victoria Young during a one-to-one masterclass

My masterclass with the Queen of Baking doesn't get off to the most auspicious start. The night before, I set about making the crispy orange zest strips that will decorate her Orange Layer Cake, the cake we're baking. It's probably performance anxiety but, reading the recipe, I can't work out what "pencil thin" slices of orange look like.

Eventually I create some slices the width of a pencil. But that's wrong, as I realise the next day when I compare my inelegant orange tongues the width of pappardelle with the dainty spaghetti-sized strands that Mary has made.

Mary, who has bustled into the kitchen exactly as she appears on the *Bake Off*, trim and tailored with her trademark twin-set and coiffed hair, clasps my arm comfortingly and looks into my eyes. "Well you had a go," she says, kindly. And for that moment I do feel like that is the most important thing.

Mary devised the recipe for the cake we are making a couple of years ago. She loves fruit in cakes and wanted to get the



After a 45-minute masterclass with Mary I feel like I'm a world class baker

whole of an orange in, so she worked out a way to do that by boiling an orange (the thin skinned kind) and blitzing up the whole thing, skin and all, to form part of the cake itself but also the mascarpone icing (you can also try it with lemons, but you have to use an extra one and a drizzle icing to counteract the sourness). The cake itself is a four-tiered affair – the type that I would skim past in a cook book fearing it was beyond my abilities.

I have come to associate baking with sweaty panics about one of a catalogue of disasters – whether chocolate splitting, cakes not rising or leaky tins – that have

befallen me in the past.

And it only takes a few moments with Mary Berry for me to self-diagnose the problem: it's a combination of slap-dashery and greed. I simply don't have the patience to do all the calm fiddly measuring, which results in me being very much a 'more or less' kind of a cook.

According to Mary, any panic would evaporate if I simply do three things. 1) Weigh out the ingredients accurately



Mary shows how to prepare the orange, as well as how to mix and bake the cake mix.



before I start. 2) Read the recipe two or three times before I make it. 3) Make sure I find the right tin before I start to cooking.

It is – obviously, I now realise – very important to use the right size tin (I'm usually lucky to find any tin at all in our cupboards at home – whether it's the right size or not is largely down to fluke). If the tin is too big then the cake will be too thin. And if it's too small, the cake will overflow. "It's a bore to measure them each time," Mary says, "So just scratch the measurement on the bottom in metric and imperial, and then you know where you are." I pause, briefly, to imagine what life would be like if I could find it in myself to be that organised.

Mary is teaching me the 'all-in-one' method of baking, which means you put all the ingredients into a bowl at once – the order isn't too important, although if you put the eggs in first it seems to work better – and then whizz them all together at once. This technique is perfectly suited to the slap-dash temperament – and is quite fool-proof.

We measure out flour, cinnamon, mixed spice, sugar and baking powder. This last is very important when it comes to accuracy, Mary explains as she clicks the bowl into the food processor base. If you add too much the cake is likely to rise up in the oven, then sink again before it finishes cooking. And it also makes it bitter. I resist the urge to heave the two teaspoons we are putting in.

Next, I discover the secret weapon in Mary's impressive baking arsenal: baking

spread (rather than butter or marg). Baking spread is formulated specially for baking, and Mary says it yields better results. And you can use it straight from the fridge which is an advantage. "I've made a Victoria sandwich using a spread and one using butter and it's gone to a tasting panel, who said they liked the spread better". The reason is that baking spread has a fairly high proportion of fat in it. "Don't pick up a low fat one, because the result will be awful!"

Mary Berry is kind and twinkly – those piercing blue eyes and long fluttery lashes – but firm and precise too. As we cook, she offers tips that, to within the baking community may seem obvious but to someone like me are invaluable: put the fat into the flour in chunks rather than one lump so it mixes more evenly; don't over-mix your cake because it squeezes too much air out creating a closer texture with smaller airholes; when you take the blade out of a food processor don't drop it in to a bowl of washing up water, because somebody will cut their hands; and, perhaps most importantly, "We're allowed to lick our fingers don't you think?"

Once the cake is mixed we grease the tins – two 8-inch loose-bottomed – and put a pre-cut disc of non-stick paper >>

Mary's golden baking rules

People who think they are bad at baking are usually not going into it saying 'I'm going to be successful'. It's like me with computers or with my laptop, or my iPad – I think 'I can't do it'... I press the wrong button and it's all gone wrong again. The thing with baking is that you've got to want to do it and you've got to expect the best of yourself.

Here are my rules of thumb: The most important thing is to choose a reliable recipe.

Don't choose something with too many ingredients and don't be too ambitious.

When cakes go wrong it's usually because you've been rushing it.

You've got to check, check, check: check you've got time to do it; always read the recipe through two or three times before you start; and check you've got the right size tin.

Weigh the ingredients accurately, and don't be over generous. It's tempting to add a bit extra because you think it will be better. But it won't.

You've got to be patient to get it right. The most important thing is to be accurate: baking is a very simple science, and you've just got to learn it.



The cake layers come out of the oven perfectly.

