

The Best Raspberry Bars

“Sandy,” “crumbly,” and “bland” shouldn’t be the words used to describe a raspberry bar. “Tender,” “fruity,” and “crunchy”—that’s more like it.

BY ERIKA BRUCE

What you look for in a raspberry bar is neither refined flavor nor stately appearance but the easy comfort of a triple-decker: sturdy crust, jam center, and crisp streusel on top. The secret of this bar cookie’s simplicity is the dough, which serves as both bottom crust and—with a modification or modification—pebbly topping. But a great-tasting raspberry bar requires just the right balance of bright, tangy fruit filling and rich, buttery shortbread.

Unfortunately, I’ve had my fair share of raspberry squares that were more crumb sandwich than bar cookie, landing on the floor rather than in my mouth. Worse than the loose crumbs was the meager layer of raspberry jam attempting feebly to hold it all together—so overcooked and leathery that the fruit flavor was gone.

One Dough, Many Problems

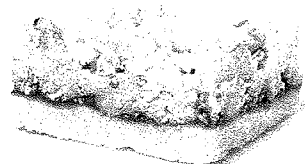
The first thing I discovered was that the economical use of a single dough for both the top and bottom crust was, unfortunately, problematic. The same dough was responsible for a firm and sturdy bottom crust and a topping that was sandy and crumbly, refusing to cohere to the filling. Some recipe writers get around this problem by making two separate mixtures for the top and bottom layers, but I was loath to make more work for myself. My goal was to create a plain and simple shortbread-like bottom crust, then somehow customize a portion of this dough to end up with a successful streusel topping.

RECIPE TESTING: The Problem with Raspberry Bars

I tested dozens of raspberry bar recipes and uncovered several recurring problems.



SANDY, DRY STREUSEL
Using the same dough for both the top and bottom layers resulted in a crumbly topping.



SKIMPY JAM
Tasters felt cheated by a skimpy, overcooked layer of jam, which got lost between thick, cookie-like layers.



TOO OATY
Too many oats and not enough flour created a streusel topping that melted right into the filling.



To create neat edges, trim ¼ inch off the borders around the baked block before cutting it into bars.

For the bottom crust, I started with a basic shortbread recipe—a simple mixture of flour, sugar, salt, and what I thought was a healthy dose of softened butter (12 tablespoons for a batch that would fill a 13- by 9-inch pan). But this crust was dense and chewy. I tried chilling the butter before mixing it with the flour (as with biscuit or pie dough); this did little to lighten the dough but rather made it

powdery and difficult to press into the pan. Finally, I tested every other tenderizer I could think of, including baking powder, lemon juice, and cornstarch. All produced botched batches of dry and gritty crust with a texture more sandy than tender. Ignoring concerns about my waistline (which I believed was becoming more substantial with each batch), I had no choice but to return to the best tenderizer of all: pure butter. It was not until the butter in the recipe reached 16 tablespoons that I bit into a shortbread crust worth eating.

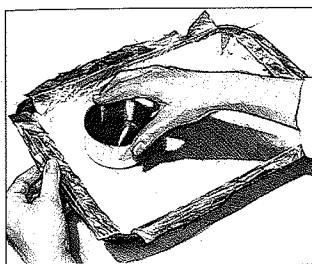
But even this butter-rich dough wasn’t up to the task of forming a neat-crumbed topping for the jam. While streusel is generally on the loose side (it means “to sprinkle” in German), I wanted a more cohesive topping for these bars. I could hardly be surprised when an extra 2 tablespoons of butter (rubbed into the dough with my fingers) produced small hazelnut-sized crumbs that melded in the oven yet remained light and crunchy. All I had to do now was add sugar and spices. Light brown sugar lent a distinct sweetness, but spices were deemed unnecessary for these fruity bars. Instead, tasters opted for a few oats and chopped nuts for more interesting dimensions of flavor and texture.

Raising the Bar

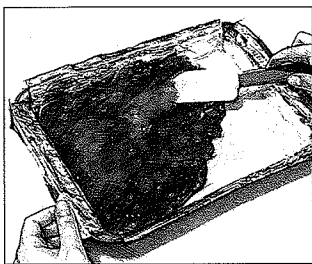
Regardless of my buttery, shortbread crust and crisp, sweet streusel, these bars were still lacking. To live up to their potential, they needed a fresh-tasting, fruity filling. Plain old raspberry jam was the filling of choice for most recipes. After sampling six brands, our tasters proclaimed Smucker’s Red Raspberry Preserves the winner. Yet even these very good preserves (made simply by cooking the berries with high-fructose corn syrup) lost significant flavor when cooked again in the raspberry bars. Thinking this was just a symptom of overcooked jam, I tried baking the bars for less time (at a higher temperature to brown the topping); this only made the jam wet and runny, with no flavor improvement.

Resigned to a more moderate cooking time and temperature, I added a dash of lemon juice to brighten the filling. This worked against the deadening heat of the oven, but it didn’t fool a single taster into believing there were fresh berries anywhere near

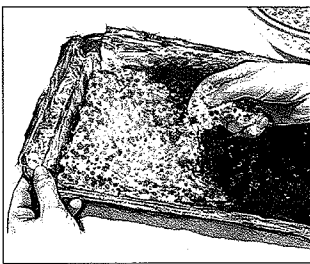
STEP-BY-STEP | RASPBERRY BAR RULES



1. Press bottom crust firmly and evenly into foil-lined pan.



2. Spread fruit filling over hot bottom crust with spatula.



3. Sprinkle streusel evenly over filling, but resist urge to press it in.

these bars. The logical solution? Use fresh berries to get fresh berry flavor. But berries alone produced a sodden, mouth-puckeringly tart raspberry bar. Clearly, there's a reason why all recipes for raspberry bars call for jam or preserves—their viscous, sweet nature is essential to the filling. I found success with a combination of preserves and fresh berries (lightly mashed for easier spreading), which produced a well-rounded flavor and perfectly moist consistency.

RASPBERRY STREUSEL BARS

MAKES TWENTY-FOUR 2-INCH SQUARES

This recipe can be made in a standing mixer or a food processor. Frozen raspberries can be substituted for fresh; be sure to defrost them before combining with the raspberry preserves. If your fresh raspberries are very tart, add only 1 or 2 teaspoons of lemon juice to the filling. The bars are best eaten the day they are baked but can be kept in an airtight container for up to 3 days (the crust and streusel will soften slightly with storage).

- 2½ cups (12½ ounces) unbleached all-purpose flour
- ⅔ cup (about 4¾ ounces) granulated sugar
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 16 tablespoons (2 sticks) plus 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch pieces and softened to cool room temperature
- ¼ cup (1¾ ounces) packed light or dark brown sugar
- ½ cup (1½ ounces) old-fashioned rolled oats
- ½ cup (2 ounces) pecans, chopped fine
- ¾ cup (8½ ounces) raspberry preserves
- ¾ cup (3½ ounces) fresh raspberries (see note)
- 1 tablespoon juice from 1 lemon

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position; heat oven to 375 degrees. Cut 18-inch length foil and fold lengthwise to 8-inch width. Fit foil into length of 13- by 9-inch baking dish, pushing it into corners and up sides of pan; allow excess to overhang pan edges. Cut 14-inch length foil and fit into width of baking pan in same manner, perpendicular to first sheet. (If using extra-wide foil, fold second sheet lengthwise to 12-inch width.) Spray foil-lined pan

with nonstick cooking spray.

2. In bowl of standing mixer fitted with flat beater, mix flour, granulated sugar, and salt at low speed until combined, about 5 seconds. With machine on low, add 16 tablespoons butter 1 piece at a time; then continue mixing on low until mixture resembles damp sand, 1 to 1½ minutes. (If using food processor, process flour, granulated sugar, and salt until combined, about 5 seconds. Scatter 16 tablespoons butter pieces over flour mixture and pulse until mixture resembles damp sand, about twenty 1-second pulses.)

3. Measure 1¼ cups flour mixture into medium bowl and set aside; distribute remaining flour mixture evenly in bottom of prepared baking pan. Using hands or flat-bottomed measuring cup, firmly press mixture into even layer to form bottom crust. Bake until edges begin to brown, 14 to 18 minutes.

4. While crust is baking, add brown sugar, oats, and nuts to reserved flour mixture; toss to combine. Work in remaining 2 tablespoons butter by rubbing mixture between fingers until butter is fully incorporated. Pinch mixture with fingers to create hazelnut-sized clumps; set streusel aside.

5. Combine preserves, raspberries, and lemon juice in small bowl; mash with fork until combined but some berry pieces remain.

6. Spread filling evenly over hot crust; sprinkle streusel topping evenly over filling (do not press streusel into filling). Return pan to oven and bake until topping is deep golden brown and filling is bubbling, 22 to 25 minutes. Cool to room temperature on wire rack, 1 to 2 hours; remove from baking pan by lifting foil extensions. Using chef's knife, cut into squares and serve.

Fresh Fruit Makes the Difference



We added fresh raspberries to preserves to get a cohesive filling that remained bright and full of raspberry flavor, even after baking.

TASTING: Raspberry Preserves

What's the difference between jellies, jams, preserves, and fruit spreads? To find out, we gathered six samples and tasted them on toast and in our raspberry bars.

In most markets, jellies have been almost completely replaced by fruit spreads (made with juice concentrates, usually pear and white grape). These spreads lack a strong, recognizable raspberry flavor and are one-dimensionally sweet. Based on our tasting, only a jam or preserve will do. The difference between the two is minor; the term "preserve" implies the presence of large pieces of fruit, while a jam should have a smooth and uniform consistency. The flavor should speak loudly of raspberry, without too much tartness or cloying sweetness. Seedless versions came across as artificial and over-processed. —Garth Clingingsmith

OUR FAVORITE SMUCKER'S Red Raspberry Preserves, \$2.99 for 18 ounces

Best of the bunch, preferred in bars and on toast. "Classic, clean" flavor, with an appropriate amount of seeds, is "exactly what this should be," one taster noted.

SEEDY SECOND TRAPPIST Red Raspberry Jam \$3.49 for 12 ounces

Flavor-wise, very similar to our favorite, but a few complaints of "too thick" or "too seedy" knocked it to second place.

NOT FOR KIDS AMERICAN SPOON FOODS Red Raspberry Preserves, \$6.95 for 9.5 ounces

This very thick, reduced preserve is on the tart side; some tasters found it "deep and complex"; others, "burnt."

ON THE SWEET SIDE BONNE MAMAN Raspberry Preserves, \$3.29 for 13 ounces

Less thick and "more spreadable" than the higher-rated preserves, but some tasters found it "toothachingly sweet."

NO MORE SEEDS SMUCKER'S Seedless Red Raspberry Jam, \$2.69 for 18 ounces

This seedless option is a smoother, sweeter version of our winner. But even self-proclaimed "seed haters" liked at least a few to "add authenticity."

MYSTERY FRUIT POLANER Raspberry All-Fruit Spreadable Fruit, \$1.79 for 10 ounces

This spread reminded tasters of apples, strawberries, and grapes, but not raspberries. The "Jell-O-like texture" was no help.

