

Baking as a  
Mindful Break  
From  
Zoom School

How making healthful treats helped me enjoy desserts again.



Sadie Radinsky uses baking as an opportunity for mindfulness.

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Feb. 9, 2021

Have you ever watched the face of a toddler with an ice cream cone? The first bite, cold and messy and sweet, is a pure delight.

Desserts bring joy. But for many girls, somewhere along the line, that joy gets squelched — replaced by stress and fear.

“This shift usually begins around middle school,” says Lucie Hemmen, a psychologist based in Santa Cruz, Calif., who specializes in my demographic: teenage girls. By that age, she said, we start absorbing our culture’s weird tension around eating, especially with desserts.

The negative messages bombard us from every direction. On TV, female characters say they shouldn't eat dessert. Ads show women denying themselves the treats they want because they're "sinful." Friends and family members comment on our appetite. [Boys are affected by cultural messages](#), too, but girls especially seem to be told that we're either eating too much or too little, or the wrong foods, or that we should be "detoxing" instead.

This is like shaming us for breathing.

But I've stumbled onto a powerful secret: Some treats can actually be our friends, and not just because they are the only ones we can safely hang out with during a lockdown. We can bake our own delicious desserts that are good for us, in every sense — nourishing our bodies and spirits.

I discovered healthful baking when I was 9. I had started getting mysterious stomach aches that often kept me in bed all day. After missing half of fourth grade and visiting doctor after doctor, I still didn't know what was wrong. As a last resort, my parents decided I should try going gluten-free. It worked. Within a few months, all my symptoms were gone. But there was one major problem. At the time, there were no good gluten-free desserts in stores. This meant I was missing out on my favorite food group: baked goods.

So, I started creating my own, using ingredients like almond flour, dark chocolate and coconut milk. They were grain-free, and low in sugar. Much to my surprise — and my family's — these treats tasted *better* than conventional desserts. Because they were less sweet, more flavor came through. We could truly taste the strawberry, the chocolate or the cinnamon when they weren't overwhelmed by sugar. And I actually felt *good* after eating them! It was a revelation.



The author mixes arrowroot starch and a little coconut sugar into cookie dough.

The grain-free, low-sugar baked goods I make are filled with protein and saturated fats like butter and coconut oil. Although the conventional wisdom is that butter is associated with cardiovascular disease, some experts argue that butter is actually nutritious, and that it's sugar that we should be avoiding.

[Nina Teicholz](#), author of "The Big Fat Surprise," maintains that the usual thinking about saturated fat is "completely upside-down and backward." Studies show that foods high in protein and fat leave us feeling satiated, Ms. Teicholz says. Ideally, we should tune in to our hunger levels and stop eating when we're full. But traditional treats are high in sugar — which can have the opposite effect, leaving

us more hungry and craving more sweets after eating them, according to [Gary Taubes](#), author of “The Case Against Sugar.”

But after having a low-sugar dessert, we feel satisfied.

Creating — and eating — these new treats became my favorite part of life. And as I have [blogged](#) and posted about baking on social media, I’ve found that many others — especially young women — share my joy.

In the pandemic in particular, [baking is an opportunity](#) for mindfulness.

The gentle clinking of my whisk on the mixing bowl pulls me into the present moment. This is my meditation. In the kitchen, surrounded by scattered chocolate chips and splashes of melted butter, there are no screens to grab my attention. I am attuned to the sensations of the process. Rolling the cookie dough into balls. Flattening them out with my palm. I am here, now, and everything else drops away.

As a freshman at “Zoom University,” I know how exhausting it is to spend hour after hour online, every day, eyes glued to the bright screen. Dr. Hemmen points out that this can make us feel disconnected from ourselves. Many of her teen clients “don’t feel real, because they’re so overstimulated by the technology.”

When we crack our eggs into the mixing bowl and beat them to a froth, we feel real again. We are drawn back into the physical world, back into our bodies.

Because we’re in the moment while baking, it also gets us in touch with our emotions. A few days ago, I was creating a new brownie recipe. While chopping up chocolate, I realized there were tears rolling down my cheeks. I’d just finished reading a news article that had really upset me. The emotion seeped into the brownies as I added more cocoa and a spoonful of strong coffee.

You know how an intense shared experience with a friend always brings the two of you closer together? Baking is like that. Getting our hands in ingredients, infusing them with our emotions, and turning them into something delicious creates a bond between us and the food. The finished product becomes more than an item on a plate.

After this slow, mindful process in the kitchen, the [experience of eating becomes mindful](#), too. When we sit down to our desserts, we receive them as gift. We savor every part of that gift because we feel all the care we put into it.

The other day, I made a grain-free [peanut butter chocolate chip skillet cookie](#). As I pulled it out of the oven, the scent of vanilla wafted up. I sank my spoon into the center of the giant cookie and took a bite. The nuttiness mingled with the bittersweet chocolate chips, which melted on my tongue. My stomach was happy and so were my spirits.

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