

Chocolate Strawberry Layer Cake

Fresh strawberry filling, strawberry cream cheese frosting

Oven 350°F · 9-inch rounds · Two layers serves 12, three layers serves 16

The Cake, Both Sizes

Two layers is the everyday birthday cake. Three layers is the full recipe, and it is the one to make when you want height on a table.

Ingredient	Two layers	Three layers	By volume
Granulated sugar	400 g	600 g	2 c / 3 c
All-purpose flour	220 g	330 g	1 3/4 c / 2 3/4 c
Cocoa powder, Dutch-process	75 g	112 g	3/4 c / 1 1/8 c
Baking powder	6 g	9 g	1 1/2 tsp / 2 1/4 tsp
Baking soda	9 g	13 g	1 1/2 tsp / 2 1/4 tsp
Fine salt	6 g	9 g	1 tsp / 1 1/2 tsp
Eggs, large, shelled	100 g	150 g	2 eggs / 3 eggs
Milk	240 g	360 g	1 c / 1 1/2 c
Vegetable oil	110 g	164 g	1/2 c / 3/4 c
Homemade vanilla extract	8 g	12 g	2 tsp / 1 Tbsp
Homemade cocoa nib extract	5 g	8 g	1 1/4 tsp / 2 tsp
Very hot water	240 g	355 g	1 c / 1 1/2 c
Total batter	1419 g	2122 g	
Per pan	710 g	707 g	
Bake time	30 to 35 min	30 to 35 min	

Why the bake times match

Both versions put the same weight of batter into the same size pan, so both fill to the same depth. Depth is what drives bake time, not how much batter is in the bowl. The three-layer version does not take longer. It just takes a third pan.

Method

1. Heat the oven to 350°F. Grease the pans and line the bottoms with parchment.
2. Whisk the sugar, flour, cocoa, baking powder, baking soda, and salt together in a large bowl. Break up any lumps of cocoa now, because the batter is too thin to work them out later.
3. Add the eggs, milk, oil, vanilla, and cocoa nib extract. Mix until combined and no dry flour remains.
4. Pour in the hot water slowly and mix until smooth. The batter will be thin, closer to a heavy cream than a cake batter. That is correct. The water blooms the cocoa and dissolves the sugar, and it is what gives this cake its soft, damp crumb.
5. Weigh the batter into the pans so the layers come out even. Eyeballing is where crooked cakes come from.
6. Bake 30 to 35 minutes, until a toothpick in the center comes out with a few moist crumbs and no wet batter.
7. Cool in the pans 10 minutes, then turn out onto a rack and cool completely. Do not fill a warm cake. The frosting will slide.

Fresh Strawberry Filling

Two layers takes one band of filling. Three layers takes two.

Ingredient	Two layers	Three layers	By volume
Fresh strawberries, hulled and finely chopped	340 g	510 g	
Granulated sugar	75 g	112 g	
Lemon juice	15 g	22 g	1 Tbsp / 1 1/2 Tbsp
Cornstarch	16 g	24 g	2 Tbsp / 3 Tbsp
Water	30 g	45 g	2 Tbsp / 3 Tbsp
Fine salt	1 g	1.5 g	a pinch
Homemade Fiore di Sicilia extract	1 g	1.5 g	1/4 tsp / scant 1/2 tsp

1. Stir the cornstarch and water together in a small bowl until smooth. Do this first, so the slurry is ready when the fruit is.
2. Put the strawberries, sugar, lemon juice, and salt in a saucepan over medium heat.
3. Cook until the berries release their juice and soften. The pan should look loose and syrupy.
4. Stir the slurry again, since it settles, then stir it into the pan.
5. Simmer 1 to 2 minutes, stirring often, until it thickens and turns glossy. It should mound on the spoon rather than run off it.
6. Take it off the heat and stir in the Fiore di Sicilia. Adding it off the heat keeps the citrus and floral notes from cooking away.
7. Cool completely before it goes near the cake.

On the cornstarch

This is set thicker than a sauce on purpose. A filling sitting between two layers has to hold its shape under the weight of the cake above it. If it runs, it pushes out the sides and the frosting goes pink and slack. Thickened correctly it stays where you put it.

Strawberry Cream Cheese Frosting

Ingredient	Two layers	Three layers	By volume
Cream cheese, softened	340 g	510 g	
Unsalted butter, softened	170 g	255 g	
Powdered sugar, sifted	540 to 675 g	810 to 1010 g	
Freeze-dried strawberry powder	18 to 22 g	27 to 33 g	
Homemade vanilla extract	6 g	9 g	1 1/2 tsp / 2 1/4 tsp
Fine salt	1 g	1.5 g	a pinch

1. Grind the freeze-dried strawberries to a fine powder and sift out any seeds or gritty bits. Freeze-dried weighs almost the same before and after grinding, so a standard bag runs close to what the two-layer cake needs.
2. Beat the butter and cream cheese together until completely smooth. Any lumps left now will still be there at the end.
3. Add the lower amount of powdered sugar, the strawberry powder, vanilla, and salt. Beat until fluffy.
4. Add more powdered sugar if you want it stiffer for piping, up to the higher number.
5. Add a little more strawberry powder if you want a deeper pink. The powder is doing the flavor and the color at once, so taste as you go rather than adding for color alone.

Keep it cold

Cream cheese frosting softens faster than buttercream, and it softens fastest under lights or in a warm kitchen. If it starts to slump, put the whole bowl in the refrigerator for 15 minutes and beat it briefly before going back to work. That is a normal part of the process, not a sign something went wrong.

Assembly

1. Set the first cooled layer on the stand. Put a plate down first if you are working on a cake stand you care about.
2. Pipe a ring of frosting around the outer edge of the layer, about a half inch in from the rim. This is the dam. It is the only thing keeping the filling inside the cake.
3. Spread the cooled strawberry filling inside the ring, level with the top of the dam and no higher.
4. Set the next layer on top, bottom side up, so the flat cut edge gives you a level surface. For a three-layer cake, repeat the dam and filling before the final layer.
5. Crumb coat the whole cake in a thin layer of frosting. It will look patchy and streaked with crumbs. That is what it is supposed to look like.
6. Chill 20 to 30 minutes, until the crumb coat is firm to a light touch.
7. Apply the final coat over the set crumb coat. The crumbs are locked underneath now, so this layer goes on clean.
8. Pipe borders or decor with whatever frosting is left.

Why bother with a crumb coat

A chocolate cake sheds dark crumbs into pink frosting, and once they are in there you cannot get them out. The crumb coat traps them against the cake and chills them in place. Skipping it is the difference between a clean pink finish and one flecked with brown.

Notes

- Weigh the batter into the pans. Two 9-inch layers at 710 g each give you a cake tall enough to look like a birthday cake rather than a snack cake.
- The batter is thin. Every time. Do not add flour to thicken it.
- Chop the strawberries small for the filling. Large pieces make the layers unstable and the cake shifts when you slice it.
- Cool the filling completely. Warm filling melts the dam from the inside.
- Freeze-dried strawberries and fresh strawberries are not interchangeable in the frosting. Fresh fruit adds water and the frosting will not hold.
- Assembled cake keeps in the refrigerator up to 3 days. Let slices sit out 20 to 30 minutes before serving so the crumb softens and the flavor comes back.

Before you shoot this

The three-layer column is your original recipe, tested and unchanged apart from being written in grams. The two-layer column is scaled down from it and has not been baked yet. The filling and frosting amounts are also new, adjusted to hold a taller cake and to cover it with enough left for piping. Holding times and serving counts are general guidance rather than numbers from your own batches. Worth knowing before any of it goes on camera as a tested recipe.