

FROM THE COVER

FLAVORY FRACTIONS

RATIO | Goal 'to provide cooks with a simple workable baseline'

Ruhlman's inspiration for the book came from Uwe Hestnar, one of his culinary school professors, a man he describes as a "cook's cook, a wily intellectual." During a culinary school bull session, Hestnar told Ruhlman he had the secret to hundreds of years of cooking, and asked whether the writer wanted to see it.

"He went to this file cabinet and pulled out a page and a half of typed out ratios," Ruhlman says. "Hollandaise was distilled down to six egg yolks and one pound of butter. I stared at those sheets. I found them fascinating."

Ruhlman took a copy and had a friend with "impeccable handwriting" create a chart for him. He framed the chart, placed it in his kitchen where he'd daydream over and memorize the ratios while washing dishes.

The concept consumed him, and friends requested copies of the chart so often, he knew a book needed to be written.

Ruhlman arrived at his own basic ratios for batters, cakes and breads through research and careful testing. Such efforts, it seems, would result in absolutes, but *Ratio* really works because of its elasticity.

A basic cookie dough is three parts flour, one part sugar and two parts fat, but such a ratio only gives you the essence of a cookie, it does not, as Ruhlman writes, provide you with "art or the best cookie ever made."

"All the ratios are variable," Ruhlman says. "I didn't go up on some mountain and come down with the stone tablet. My goal was to provide cooks with a simple workable baseline."

But, you must realize what the essence of a cookie is, how the components inform the final product. Only then can you experiment and let the improvisational spirit that's so rewarding in savory cooking take over.

My own practical revelation came with Ruhlman's gougères (cheese-infused cream puffs) recipe. My folks came to town recently, and as usual, I was raring to take them to my latest restaurant find.

My mother however, requested that I cook dinner instead. While I was unprepared, I could not refuse the woman who'd sustained me so often. Cobbling together a good meal turned out to be relatively easy, but the meal needed a capstone.

Luckily, I'd remembered the cream puff dough ratio: two parts water, one part butter, one part flour and two parts egg.

While traditional gougères are made with Gruyere cheese, I didn't have any. I threw in some aged Vermont Cheddar I had on hand and a handful of rosemary with confidence, because I knew the basic ratios for the



Flour, eggs and butter are three key tools in baking. Once you have the basics down, it's up to you to improvise, Ruhlman writes. | PHOTOS COURTESY DONNA TURNER RUHLMAN PHOTOGRAPHY

dough are the only thing that mattered.

Half an hour later, as I watched my mother bite through creamy, eggy airy puffs redolent with Cheddar perfume, I'm pretty sure I spotted a moistened eye. Then again, my mother would love me if they had been little bricks. The real lesson was that I now had the confidence to bake.

Ruhlman says he had a similar revelation after writing the book.

"I am a terrible baker. I never felt comfortable in a cold kitchen or a patisserie," he says. "But there I am on the CBS Early Show, demonstrating baking recipes. If I can demo recipes in under four minutes on national television with this book, *anybody* can bake."

Michael Nagrant is a Chicago free-lance writer.

BASIC PATE A CHOUX

Choux paste can be made start to finish using a saucepan and a sturdy wooden spoon if that's your desire or if you don't have a standing mixer, beating in the eggs by hand, but I've found that you get a better puff or rise when you beat the eggs in with a mixer. An electric beater will also work with this preparation.

MAKES ENOUGH FOR 24 GOUGERES

8 ounces (1 cup) water
4 ounces (1 stick) butter
½ teaspoon salt
4 ounces (a scant cup) flour
8 ounces (4 large) eggs

Bring the water, butter and salt to a simmer over high heat. Reduce heat to medium, add the flour and stir rapidly. The flour will absorb the water quickly and a dough will form and pull away from the sides.

Keep stirring to continue cooking the flour and cook off some of the water, another minute or two. Remove pan from heat and let it cool slightly, a few minutes, or cool off the pan itself by running cold water over its base. You don't want to cook the eggs too quickly, but the choux paste needs to be warm to hot.

Add the eggs one at a time, stirring rapidly until each is combined into the paste; it takes a few seconds — at first it

will seem as though the dough won't accept them. The paste will go from shiny to flat, slippery to furry, when the eggs are fully in. Alternately, transfer the butter-flour paste to the bowl of a standing mixer fitted with the paddle and mix in the eggs one at a time.

The pate a choux can be cooked immediately or refrigerated for up to a day until ready to use.

TO MAKE GOUGERES:

To the basic pate a choux ingredients, add an additional teaspoon of salt to the water and stir in ½ cup of grated Parmigiano-Reggiano or Gruyere after the eggs have been incorporated.

On a parchment- or Silpat-lined baking sheet, pipe or spoon out golf ball-sized portions of the paste. Wet your finger with water or milk and press down any peaks, which can burn. Place the gougères in an oven preheated to 425 degrees. Reduce heat to 350 degrees after 10 minutes to complete their cooking, 10 to 20 minutes longer. Taste or cut into one to judge doneness.

From *Ratio*
by Michael Ruhlman

Nutrition facts per serving: 71 calories, 5 g fat, 3 g saturated fat, 50 mg cholesterol, 4 g carbohydrates, 2 g protein, 147 mg sodium, 0 g fiber



Gougères (pictured) are savory puffs made from pate a choux, a dough of nothing more than butter, water, flour and eggs.

RIP'S SPICE COOKIES

Using a scale to measure the shortening makes for much cleaner work than measuring shortening by volume.

The cookies will spread out, so leave some room between cookies on the baking sheet. The egg and baking powder will give the cookie a little lift, a slightly less dense crumb.

MAKES ABOUT 24 COOKIES

10 ounces (1½ cups) vegetable shortening
8 ounces (about 1 cup) sugar
1 large egg
¼ cup molasses
12 ounces (about 2 cups) flour
1 teaspoon baking powder
2 teaspoons ground cinnamon

1 teaspoon ground ginger
¼ teaspoon salt

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Combine the shortening, sugar, and egg and mix thoroughly in a standing mixer or by hand. Add the molasses and continue mixing. Combine the remaining ingredients and fold them into the dough. Roll into small balls or spoon

out tablespoons of dough onto a baking sheet. Give them some room because they'll spread. Bake for 15 minutes or until the edges begin to darken.

From *Ratio* by Michael Ruhlman

Nutrition facts per cookie: 174 calories, 10 g fat, 3 g saturated fat, 10 mg cholesterol, 19 g carbohydrates, 1 g protein, 171 mg sodium, 0 g fiber

MY SUMMER OF CSA

Cattail shoots, edible *and* tasty

BY MISHA DAVENPORT
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When I signed up for a weekly half-share in a Community Supported Agriculture food drop, I had been hoping it would force me to try new fruits and vegetables.

In my first week, the wish came true. Mixed in with the assorted lettuces, spinach, radishes and kale were ... cattail shoots.

Yes, those fuzzy brown things you see growing in wetlands are edible. After peeling the bulk of the stringy and thus inedible shoot, you're left with a soft core that tastes like a woody celery.

A 1-ounce serving is just seven calories and is an excellent source of fiber, vitamins K and B6, calcium, magnesium, potassium and manganese.

I took the advice of my farm, Harvest Moon Farms in Viroqua, Wis., and used the shoots in a rice pilaf recipe provided by the farm, adding my own touches.

I wolfed down the first bowl and actually went back for seconds.

Next week: *What else to do with all this kale.*



Cattail shoots, tucked inside this reporter's first CSA produce box, went right into a recipe for rice pilaf, with stellar results. The edible core tastes a bit like celery. | MISHA DAVENPORT-FOR THE SUN-TIMES

CATTAIL AND VEGETABLE BASMATI RICE PILAF

MAKES 2 SERVINGS

½ tablespoon sesame oil
1 clove garlic, minced
¼ cup basmati rice
½ cup chicken stock
½ tablespoon olive oil
1 small onion, chopped
¼ cup cattail shoots, sliced (about 4 to 6 shoots)
1 carrot, chopped
½ cup kale, chopped
Soy sauce or salt

Heat sesame oil over medium heat. Add garlic and cook briefly, (about 2 minutes). Add rice, stir to coat and add stock. Bring to boil, then cover and reduce to simmer. Cook for 25 minutes or until the rice is soft.

Heat olive oil in a sauce pan. Add onion, cattail shoots and carrot. Cook for 10 minutes or until onion is translucent.

Mix vegetables into cooked rice. Add kale just before serving. Season with soy sauce or salt to taste.

Adapted from Harvest Moon Farms

Nutrition facts per serving: 215 calories, 8 g fat, 1 g saturated fat, 2 mg cholesterol, 31 g carbohydrates, 5 g protein, 147 mg sodium, 4 g fiber