

# Why Work When You Can Procrastibake?

By **Julia Moskin**

May 15, 2018

All procrastibakers do not bake alike.

Procrastibaking — the practice of baking something completely unnecessary, with the intention of avoiding “real” work — is a surprisingly common habit that has only recently acquired a name. Medical students, romance writers, freelance web designers: Almost anyone who works at home and has a cookie sheet in the cupboard can try it.

“I started procrastibaking in college as a way to feel productive while also avoiding my schoolwork,” said Wesley Straton, a graduate student in Brooklyn. “Baking feels like a low-stakes artistic outlet.”

Some procrastibakers like to make long, slow recipes that break up the entire day, returning to their spreadsheets or study guides in between steps like proofing, chilling and rising. Those who use baking as a transition into a creative state of mind are more likely to stir up a quick banana bread or pan of brownies.

“My personal favorite time suck is baking macarons,” said the author Jessica Cale. “Not only does it take quite a lot of time and patience to figure out how to get them right, but it can take up to three days to complete the process.”



Mia Hopkins, a novelist, procrastinates by making pies when writer's block strikes.  
Oriana Koren for The New York Times

Procrastibaking is also a thriving hashtag on Instagram, where #procrastibaking posts seem to proliferate just before annual rituals of anxiety like exam weeks, Tax Day and Election Day. And on any given day, baking photos are popular on Instagram, whether they are of plain chocolate chip cookies or a pastel rainbow-stripe cake.

It's clear that for many cooks, today's telecommuting jobs, combined with the comforting rituals of the kitchen and the lure of Instagram "likes," have made procrastibaking irresistible.

"I should admit that I find many ways to procrastinate, but most of them, like weeding out the sock drawer for singletons, are just not as Instagrammable," said Allison Adato, an editor at People magazine.

Rachel Courville, a veterinary student at the University of Missouri in Columbia, has baking sessions alongside study sessions "to prepare for hell weeks where we just have an inhumane amount of tests," she said. "To decide what to make, I just think, 'What will make my future, super-stressed-out self a little happier?'" (The answer, she said, is usually cake.)

The familiar rhythms and sweet rewards of baking make it a popular form of procrastination. Oriana Koren for The New York Times

Tim Pychyl, a professor of psychology at Carleton University in Ottawa, says that procrastination is one of few situations in which people consistently make choices that are demonstrably bad.

“We make an emotional, irrational decision to do what feels good right now,” instead of doing what is necessary, he said. “Present self feels better, but future self gets jerked around.” Procrastibaking, he added, like procrasticleaning, is an unconsciously deployed strategy that makes us feel skilled, nurturing and virtuous in the present while distracting us from the future.

“The kitchen gets a mighty workout in March and April,” said Renee Kohlman, a freelance writer in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. (Canadian income tax filings are due on April 30.) “I know I should be at my desk, calculating how much I spent on internet and groceries and gas, but somehow I find myself at the counter, measuring out yeast and flour to make cinnamon buns.”

Best practices for procrastibaking are still being established.

“The ‘fun’ component is essential to procrastibaking, so the content of your product should not be something that you need to make in order to meet your daily nutritional needs,” Amy Sentementes wrote in an email. Ms. Sentementes, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, writes a blog about eating well as a graduate student. Baking sweet potatoes until they caramelize is a great project, she said, but it’s not procrastibaking.

Even some professional bakers procrastibake. “I think it’s part of my creative process, and I just need to submit to it,” said Erin Gardner, a cake decorator in New Hampshire.  
Tony Luong for The New York Times

Also, any recipe that requires leaving the house to buy ingredients is not in the spirit of procrastibaking. The procrastibaker must believe that it is possible to be simultaneously working on a document, buttering pans and separating eggs. A shopping trip to buy cocoa powder destroys the fantasy that the baking is not really an interruption of the work. That’s why recipes like “kitchen sink” cookies, which use whatever ingredients are on hand, are ideal.

Jonathan Martin, a medical student in London, says that the best recipes for effective procrastibaking are those with many steps, allowing the procrastibaker to get some work done in between and sustain an illusion of efficiency. “I make a few sourdough loaves, with the autolyzing, bulk proofing and then final rising steps all hours apart,” he said.

Another favorite is millionaire’s shortbread, which demands time for the layers — shortbread, then caramel, then chocolate — to chill between steps. “Looking forward to the next step allows me to enjoy and justify the time spent,” he said.

There’s a vivid description of procrastibaking, before it had that name, in a poem by Grace Paley called “The Poet’s Occasional Alternative” (published in “Begin Again,” her 2000 collection). It begins: “I was going to write a poem / I made a pie instead it took / about the same amount of time / of course the pie was a final / draft a poem would have some / distance to go days and weeks and / much crumpled paper.”

Ms. Gardner warms up for complicated decorating jobs, like this peony cake, with simple treats like cookies and brownies. Tony Luong for The New York Times

Many writers say that procrastibaking is actually part of their work, allowing them to enter a “flow state” that is conducive to creative thinking.

Mia Hopkins, a Los Angeles writer of racy romance novels, came to procrastibaking late. “When I was schoolteacher, I used to procrastinate by reading and writing romances,” she said. “When I started writing romance full time, I had to find a new way to procrastinate.”

She said that procrastibaking is her way out of writer’s block — especially pie, because it is more stimulating to the senses than other recipes. “You can bake an entire cake without touching anything,” she said. “With a pie, you squeeze the dough, you slice the fruit, you crimp the crust.” Baking helps her get out of the tangle of words in her head and into the physical world, she said, which helps with her particular line of work.

More surprisingly, there are many professional bakers who procrastibake.

“I used to beat myself up over it, but I don’t anymore,” said Erin Gardner, a cake decorator in New Hampshire. “I think it’s part of my creative process, and I just need to submit to it.” Inventing stunning new ways to shape chocolate flowers and stack cake layers is an imperative for Ms. Gardner, who contributes to The Cake Blog and to American Cake Decorating magazine, and who occasionally competes on the cutthroat cake-show circuit.

“Being in a field where I have to be creative on demand, I think my brain needs to ride on cruise control before getting down to business,” she said. So when she is procrastibaking, she sticks to the recipes she can make without thinking, like cookies, scones and brownies.

“Maybe I’m like a professional athlete,” she said. “We can’t just get out there on the floor and start playing and be at the top of our game. We have to warm up, stretch, do our drills.”

Recipes: **Juicy Orange Cake** | **Kitchen Sink Cookies**

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A version of this article appears in print on May 15, 2018, on Page D1 of the New York edition with the headline: But First, I’ll Bake

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