

Picky Eater: Pancake Mixes

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Pancakes. (Dan Honda/Staff)

Before I cracked the first egg, warmed up the griddle or broke out the maple syrup for this dissection of the pancake mix genre, I did my due diligence: I talked to a friend who spends one Sunday morning a month flipping enough pancakes to feed 80 hungry junior high students.

She makes flapjacks of every type, from autumnal pumpkin to emerald green -- for St. Patrick's Day, of course. But no matter what gets poured or sprinkled on top, the key to making great pancakes is the mix. It has to be made with fresh flour and just the right balance of leavening for hot cakes that are not salty, but light and tender; they must be moist, but not so dense that they gum up under the syrup.

My friend's favorite pancake mix is the economical Krusteaz Original. But I lined up a dozen types when I set out to find out which mixes turn out the best pancakes. I quickly discovered that pricey pancake mixes aren't always the best. But occasionally, they are.

Here's the scoop:

Stonewall Kitchen Granola Pancake: I wasn't a fan of this company's buttermilk mix, which made for pale, flat, salty cakes, and I didn't have much hope as I poured this thin, brown-tinged batter on the griddle. But these are just awesome. They have nice chunks of softened granola in a rich,

slightly sweet, vanilla-infused batter. They're so flavorful, you can get by with just a tiny drizzle of syrup. A serving has 280 calories, 2 g fiber. A 16-ounce can is \$8-\$9 at some Sur La Table stores or online at www.stonewallkitchen.com. H H H H

Jack & Jason's Double Chocolate: This is a small-label mix that's only sold in a handful of stores in San Francisco, but if you're looking for an indulgent treat, this is it. It's a dessert on the griddle. I love the contrast of the creamy white chocolate chips in rich chocolate batter. (Their other flavors -- pumpkin, banana walnut and blueberry -- sound tempting, too.) A serving has 220 calories, 4 g fiber. A 16-ounce box is about \$6 if you buy a six-pack online at www.jackandjasons.com. H H H H

Eating Right Whole Wheat: These light, tender pancakes by Eating Right, a Safeway brand, are perfect for every day, as they have a touch of whole grain, a pleasing dash of sweetness, and they brown up nicely. A serving has 150 calories (without the egg and oil), 4 g fiber. A 32-ounce box is \$3.29. H H H H

King Arthur Flour All Natural Multi-Grain: I did not care for the flat, salty flavor of the King Arthur buttermilk version, but this slightly pricey, multigrain mix turned out nice cakes with a fresh, grainy flavor. One serving has 5 grams fiber, 200 calories. A 16-ounce box is \$5.95. H H H

Trader Joe's Multigrain: Trader Joe's buttermilk mix was not a winner -- it didn't rise or brown well and it tasted salty -- but this Multigrain Mix is right on the mark. The pancakes are hefty, with balanced flavor, and it's very affordable. One serving has 2 g fiber, 230 calories. A 32-ounce box is \$1.99. H H H

Krusteaz Wheat & Honey: It's no secret that Krusteaz is the go-to for those who want a no-fuss pancake mix -- all you add is water. I tried the original and the Wheat & Honey, both of which turned out tall cakes that browned up nicely. I especially liked the bran flavor in the Wheat & Honey. A serving has 220 calories, 4 g fiber. A 56-ounce bag of Wheat & Honey is \$4.99. H H ½

Aunt Jemima Original: This just-add-water mix turns out ordinary white-flour pancakes that are fluffy, slightly sweet and every bit as good as cakes made with added egg and oil. However, it comes in a cardboard box with no liner, which puts my pantry at risk. A serving has 160 calories, 1 g fiber. A 32-ounce box is \$3.29. H H

Heart Smart Bisquick: These are the white-flour pancakes that I grew up eating. They're so light and airy, you barely notice their bland flavor profile. A serving has 200 calories, less than 1 g fiber. \$3.89 for 40 ounces. H H

Pamela's Wheat-Free and Gluten-Free: When you consider that people who can't tolerate gluten can't even consider traditional wheat-based pancakes, these pancakes -- made with rice flour and tapioca starch -- are pretty awesome. That said, they don't taste like the traditional version, and you'll need to cook them well or they come out gummy. A serving has 250 calories, 1.5 g fiber. A 24-ounce bag is \$6.35. H H