



Best Ways to Smooth Cake Icing

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Step 1: Begin With a Great Recipe

- Decorator Buttercream Recipes (i.e. 2 pounds powdered sugar to 1 pound fat) which call for meringue powder may whip up fluffy
 - Many recipes recommend adding meringue powder just for this purpose – so the icing incorporates more air
 - Meringue powder is not necessary for “decorator buttercream” – an equal amount of cornstarch may be used instead to help dry icing for “crusting”
- Meringue-based recipes containing pasteurized egg whites, (or meringue powder, or dried egg white powder – aka “color flow mix”) do whip up smoothly. These involve beating the “egg whites” (mix + warm water) into foam and then adding the sugar and fat. These do not crust and must be used immediately (*see Laurie’s Meringue Icing Recipe, Wilton Snow White Buttercream Recipe and Duff Goldman’s French Buttercream Recipe*)
- Some recipes call for boiling water – this helps warm the icing so it will be a thinner, smoother consistency when icing but will set up firmer on the cake at room temperature (*see Whimsical Bakehouse Recipe*)
- Some call for no water or milk at all – they just contain less powdered sugar. Instead of making a stiff icing and thinning it out, these recipes start with the fat and flavorings, beat them until smooth, then add enough powdered sugar to get the consistency you wish. (*see Laurie’s Vanilla Decorator Buttercream Recipe*)
- Thinner icings are easier to pull a spatula through. Too-thin icings will droop down the sides of your cakes and make it difficult to form sharp edges. Even worse: adding too much water can make your icing separate or “break”. Try using small amounts of corn syrup or piping gel instead – these will thin the icing and provide elasticity. Note: this may prevent icing from “crusting”, making it difficult to use the “Viva” method for smoothing. Wait longer for crusting or treat as a non-crusting buttercream (see notes on “Viva” method below).
- Non-Dairy whipped icings are very smooth
 - Pastry Pride – like whipped cream, avail. in freezer at Smart N Final
 - Frostin’ Pride – whipped buttercream (non-dairy), avail. in freezer at Smart N Final
 - Rich’s Bettercreme – whipped buttercream (non-dairy), avail. in chocolate at Smart N Final
 - In the case of the above three products, do not over-whip icing. If you see a lot of air bubbles add a couple of tablespoons of fresh liquid into your mixture and re-beat slowly to smooth it out
 - Wilton Whipped Icing Mix – avail. at Michaels in Wilton aisle
 - Faux whipped icings are also very smooth. Commercial non-dairy whipped icings actually contain sodium caseinate, which is a milk-based stabilizer, making these icings unsuitable for people with milk allergies. These homemade versions are delicious – and have the benefit of being *truly* dairy-free when made without milk. (*see Arlene Valera’s Whipped Cream Icing Recipe*) These icings, however, cannot be left in warm environments (Pastry Pride has a reputation for being used well in warm weather – but can sometimes weep or separate – conduct your own tests before using it on an important cake outdoors in July).
- Start with buttercream without air bubbles
 - Mix in first half of sugar and beat for as long as needed to remove lumps and air bubbles. Air won’t whip into this mixture until you add the rest of the sugar. When you do, mix on low speed for several minutes – do not whip.
 - Chef Duff Goldman recommends always using your icing “warm”. For this he employs a blowtorch on the outside of the bowl or directly into the icing. Be very careful not to scorch your mixer or beater – flame travels around the sides of the bowl! If you don’t have a torch:
 - Let sit overnight and/or. . .
 - Stir with spatula, end of wooden spoon or on low speed in mixer for a long time (some recipes recommend 25 minutes!)
 - Store fresh icing in Ziploc bag on counter. When filling pastry bags cut end of Ziploc and squeeze icing into pastry bag – bubbles pop on their way through the Ziploc.
- Use a cake icer tip and 16” bag.

- Fill 16” bag with icing from a Ziploc – air bubbles get popped on their way into the bag and again on their way out, when applied to the cake.

Step 2: Icing the Cake

- Smooth icing with spatula in a “buttering bread” motion, back and forth to spread bubbles out of outside layer of icing. Smooth top in similar fashion.
- Use a bench scraper to smooth sides, always pulling in the same direction around cake
- Laurie likes to use boards at least 1” larger than the cake being iced. Rest the bench scraper directly on the board and keep at a 90 degree angle as you spin the cake on the turntable. After icing, chill cake and carefully cut away extra cardboard using heavy duty scissors. This can be a little tricky, but this method keeps the scraper or spatula from catching on the bumpy sides of the cake board, which usually results in “corrugated” icing on the cake sides. This also allows for an even thicker coat of icing when needed.
- “Cut” icing from the edge in toward the middle of the cake. Use bench scraper or a large spatula to smooth the cake top – simply hold it in place while you spin the turntable swiftly.
- Repeat smoothing sides and top until cake is complete.
- Use a long ruler to smooth top of cake. A metal ruler is best since it can be heated for use with the Hot Knife Method.

Step 3: Not Smooth Enough?

- Hot knife method: Use a tall jar (vase) of very hot water to heat spatula. Use this to continue smoothing sides and top of cake. Spatula may be dried before applying to cake, or you can shake off the excess drops of water and let that help smooth your icing. If a sink is handy you can run your bench scraper under hot water and use this in the same manner.
- Hair dryer method: Use a clean hairdryer on a hot setting. Heat the buttercream gently all around the cake until the surface appears smooth.
- Spritzing method: Try spraying your cake very lightly with a fine mist of room temp water, then smooth again. Thank you, Shirley Roberts, for mentioning this to me – I have used this method with wonderful results!
- “Viva method”: Works well with “crusting” icings (anything with around twice as much sugar as fat by weight). Let icing “crust” (dry out) for 15 minutes. When icing is no longer wet (gently touch with a finger – if icing stays on the cake --and not on your finger-- it is ready*), lay a paper towel against the side/top and smooth with spatula/bench scraper/fondant smoother/hand-held roller. Only two paper towels on the market are smooth – Viva and the awful brown paper towels you get in dispensers in restrooms. Both work well. This method works very well for “faux fondant” cakes – just smooth icing to bevel the top edge, and then apply the paper towel to smooth the curve. A soft fan-shaped paintbrush dipped in hot water may also be used. *Don’t allow your icing to crust for too long – after a while the icing will simply crack when you try to smooth it out. If this happens switch to the spritzing method.
 - *This method can be used on non-crusting buttercreams* – just refrigerate the cake until you can touch the icing without pulling any away when you remove your finger – test your cake every 15 minutes to see if it’s ready, then work quickly before it comes back to room temperature.
- “Melvira method”: This appeared in an article on www.cakecentral.com just recently, and has received a lot of attention. Use a “crusting” buttercream and the “Viva method” – but without a paper towel or parchment! Simply roll a high-density foam roller (found in the house paint section of Super Wal-Mart or hardware stores) all over the icing. If the icing has crusted properly this should erase creases with ease.
 - This method can also be used on non-crusting buttercreams. See note just above.

Step 4: Still Not Smooth Enough??

1. Ask yourself if you are being too self-conscious. This happens all the time, because we are all perfectionists. Remember who you are making this cake for – will this person notice the three air bubbles on your otherwise pristine cake? If they notice, will they care? Most people are just thrilled to have a special cake – they’re not worried about a couple of bubbles in the icing.
2. Pipe a dot, a scroll, or a flower on top of your mistake. I’ve heard enough decorators say this to know it’s true: “It’s not how you mess up – it’s how you cover up!” It’s a good idea to avoid committing to a smooth cake with minimal decorations -- decorations cover up flaws!
3. Sometimes a cake just has to be “perfect” – usually this is because it is being judged critically by someone. If you are doing a cake for competition, switch to using a dummy and royal icing. Brush thin coats of royal onto the dummy and sand them down when dry. Add as many coats as you need to make it perfect. Read books from England on the best methods for doing this. If you are making this cake for a wedding, do the best you can and learn from your mistakes –

next time don't promise the bride you can do something "plain and simple" without *at least* piping scrolls or dots or adding extra flowers!

Step 5: If your cake still isn't smooth enough at this point, just switch to a basketweave technique or rolled buttercream icing! Rolled buttercream is very soft, not chewy like fondant. Many people can't tell much of a difference between this and regular buttercream icing. (see *Marsha Winbeckler's Rolled Buttercream Recipe*)



Laurie Clarke teaches cake decorating, candy and sugar art classes in the South San Jose area. Private classes may be arranged. Please contact Laurie for details at 408/505-5507, laurie@sweetcelebrations.us or www.sweetcelebrations.us

Recipes

Laurie's Note: I have included the original authors' names with their recipes rather than altering them enough to call them my own – they're perfect the way they are. My wish is to give credit to those people who have worked so hard to teach us so much. I highly recommend purchasing their books, as the recipes shown are only the beginning of the wonderful information you can find within. These are available through American Cake Decorating / Mailbox News Magazines, online at www.winbeckler.com or at www.americancakedecorating.com.

**These recipes are included, along with a great deal of other fabulous recipes, in the book "40 Years of Frosters' Favorites", available from the Fremont Frosters for \$8 or online for \$12 from www.fremontfrosters.com*

Laurie's Standard Crusting Buttercream Icing

To fix the trans-fat-free Crisco issues I've replace a small amount of the shortening in this recipe with margarine. Icing is not quite bright white but few people can notice the difference. Actually matches most pillars and plates very well. This is one of the icings I use when the weather is warm.

12 oz. (1 1/2 cups) Crisco
4 oz. (1 stick or 1/2 cup) stick margarine, room temp
1/2 tsp butter flavoring
1 tsp clear vanilla flavoring
1/2 tsp additional flavoring (lemon, raspberry, almond or orange work well to cut the sweetness)
2 lbs powdered sugar
4 Tbsp (+ or -) milk or water

Mix first 5 ingredients together until smooth and creamy. Add 1 pound of the sugar and sprinkle 2 T of water or milk on top. Mix until smooth. Add remaining sugar and sprinkle 2 T of water or milk on top. Mix until icing comes together. Over-mixing can cause air bubbles --though, for a lighter, fluffier icing I whip on medium speed 2 minutes (with beater) and deal with a texture a little less refined on my cake. Add additional milk or water as necessary to achieve stiff peak consistency; remove 1 cup for roses. Remove 1/2 cup for thin consistency -- add piping gel to reach desired texture (not milk or water). Use enough liquid to achieve medium consistency for the rest of the bowl.

Makes 6 to 7 cups. Can be stored at room temperature 2 days, in fridge for 3 weeks, or in freezer 6 months.

Laurie's Meringue Icing Recipe

Using completely grease-free tools sprinkle **3 Tbsp Meringue Powder** over **1/2 cup warm water** in mixing bowl and beat to a soft peak with paddle on high speed. With mixer running add **1 cup superfine granulated sugar** gradually and continue to beat to a stiff peak. Add **1/4 cup margarine**, **1/4 cup butter**, and **1 cup Crisco (8 oz.)** a little at a time, beating to incorporate after each addition*. Add **1 tsp vanilla extract**, **1/2 tsp butter flavoring**, and **1/2 tsp your choice of flavoring** (optional) – I use almond extract. Beat on low speed 2 minutes to smooth air bubbles. Best when used immediately. Icing may be frozen, thawed and re-beaten, but consistency may not smooth out nicely.

* Butter/Margarine may be increased to ½ cup of each. Combination of Crisco, butter and margarine can be changed – all Crisco or all butter may be used. This icing is buttery-tasting and not very sweet.

Wilton Snow White Buttercream Icing Recipe (Updated June 2010 due to issues with trans-fat-free Crisco)

Note from Wilton: This buttercream icing has an ideal consistency for frosting cakes. It is usually not necessary to thin this icing for frosting cakes. Do so accordingly if you prefer a thinner consistency for spreading. It has a firm quality making it good for wedding cake decorations and flat surface or flower nail flowers. Air dry decorations for 24 hours.

For thin (spreading) consistency icing, add up to 4 more tablespoons **each** water and corn syrup.

NOTE: Changes in Wilton's traditional recipes have been made due to Trans Fat Free Shortening replacing Hydrogenated Shortening.

Ingredients:

- 2/3 cup + 3 tablespoons water, divided
- [1/4 cup Meringue Powder](#)
- 12 cups sifted confectioners' sugar, (about 3 lbs.) divided
- 1 1/4 cups solid vegetable shortening
- 3 tablespoons light corn syrup
- 3/4 teaspoon salt
- [3/4 teaspoon no-color almond extract](#)
- [3/4 teaspoon clear vanilla extract](#)
- [1/2 teaspoon no-color butter flavor](#)

Makes: About 7 cups of icing.

instructions

Stiff Consistency:

In large bowl, combine 2/3 cup water and meringue powder; whip with electric mixer at high speed until peaks form. Add 4 cups sugar, one cup at a time, beating at low speed after each addition. Add remaining 8 cups sugar and 3 tablespoons water, shortening and corn syrup in 3 additions, blending well after each. Add salt and flavorings; beat at low speed until smooth. Keep bowl covered with a damp cloth until ready to use. For best results, keep icing bowl in refrigerator when not in use. Refrigerated in an airtight container, this icing can be stored 2 weeks. Rewhip before using.

Silky Smooth Buttercream Icing

Notes: This icing is moderately sweet (somewhere between standard buttercream and Italian Meringue Icing). It has a smooth, shiny texture that hardens when refrigerated. At room temperature it is soft, but not runny. Suitable for all medium-consistency applications, strings/writing and roses if piped quickly. If stiffer flowers are desired a little extra powdered sugar may be added.

Ingredients:

- 1/2 cup pasteurized egg whites
- 1 pound, 6 oz. (Approx. 5 1/2 cups) powdered sugar
- 1 T clear vanilla
- 1 T vanilla extract
- 1/2 tsp butter flavoring
- 1/2 tsp salt (popcorn salt preferred)

1 1/2 pounds (6 sticks) unsalted butter, softened
1 cup shortening (Crisco OK)

Instructions:

In a large mixing bowl combine sugar, salt and egg whites. With stand mixers use wire whip attachment. Beat on high for 5 to 10 minutes until a light, smooth royal icing is formed. Slowly add softened butter and shortening two tablespoons at a time until combined. Add flavorings and beat at high speed an additional 5 to 10 minutes to reach full volume.

Fill, crumbcoat and ice cake immediately. For optimal smoothness cake can be re-smoothed after refrigerating at least 30 minutes. Or, chill in refrigerator after applying crumbcoat. When applying the final coat of icing it will harden quickly so you can do the final smoothing in one step.

Note: All-butter icings crack when brought to room temp too quickly or when they're on flexible boards/bases. Shortening has been added to this icing recipe to prevent this. However, care should still be taken with this icing when removing cake from refrigerator and transporting. Icing is best after reaching room temperature, so plan your trip and your display accordingly.

Yield: 6 Cups

Whimsical Bakehouse Recipe ("House Buttercream")

In Mixer bowl, stir together:

6 Cups Confectioners' Sugar
1/8 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon Vanilla Extract

Using whip attachment, add and whip on low speed:

1 cup boiling water (3/4 cup on hot days)

Whip until smooth and is cool.

Add and whip until smooth again:

2 3/4 cup Hi-Ratio or regular vegetable shortening
6 ounces (1 1/2 sticks) butter; slightly chilled and cut into 1" pieces

Turn up mixer to medium-high. Whip until double in volume and is light and fluffy. About 10-20 minutes. Recipe will almost fill a 5-quart mixer bowl when done.

Makes 9 1/2 cups

For chocolate Buttercream exchange 1 cup of icing sugar for powdered Cocoa.

****Laurie's Favorite Buttercream Recipe***

This is slightly less sweet (only 1:1 fat to sugar instead of 1:2), crusts a little for smoothing and repairs well. It's also pretty white for something that has so much butter. My favorite thing is that this is the absolute limit of what my mixer can hold at one time -- it's 2 1/2 times a regular recipe. Freezes and thaws beautifully without having to re-beat. Meringue powder and/or cornstarch can be added for warm weather -- but for hot weather I usually switch to "Snow White Buttercream" (no butter).

1 1/2 sticks margarine (Parkay seems to be lightest in color)
1 1/2 sticks butter (I use salted, though unsalted seems to be a little lighter in color)
12 oz (1 1/2 cups) white shortening
1 tsp clear vanilla
1/2 tsp popcorn salt (finer grain than table salt -- omit if using salted butter)
2 1/4 lbs powdered sugar, divided

1. In large mixer bowl with beater attachment combine butter, margarine, shortening, vanilla and salt. Beat for a minute to loosen.
2. Add 1 1/4 lbs of sugar all at once. Beat and scrape sides until mixture is smooth and lump-free.
3. Add remaining sugar all at once. Beat and scrape sides on medium speed for about 2 minutes. If mixture is too stiff (i.e. mixer makes a noise) add a little vanilla coffee creamer or milk and beat again. If mixture is too loose, add a cup of sugar and beat again.
4. To prevent large bubbles in icing stir with a spatula for a few minutes by hand -- or put into ziploc bag and let rest for a few minutes. Cut a hole in bottom corner of ziploc and squeeze into your decorating bag or directly onto cake -- squeezing through the ziploc eliminates almost all air bubbles.

****Kathy Przywara's Whipped Icing (Non-Dairy and Gluten-Free Optional)***

Kathy's Notes: You actually cook the milk/flour (which can be dairy free milk alternative and/or a gluten free flour mix) to make a paste. It can also be made using all shortening, soy margarine/butter or non-dairy margarine (Smart Balance or Nucoa). This also makes a great pastry cream for filling cupcakes or cream canoes and works particularly well on ice cream cakes as it is not rock hard like buttercream when frozen.

4-5 tbsp flour (depending on how stiff you want it, gluten free flour mix works here too)
1 cup milk or alternative (soy and rice milk work, don't know about DariFree; original, plain Silk is the lightest color and taste)
1/2 cup butter/margarine
1/2 cup shortening
1 cup granulated sugar (Kathy uses superfine)
1 tsp vanilla or other flavoring

Combine the flour and milk in a small pan. Whisk the milk slowly into the flour to ensure no lumps. Make sure there are no lumps or you will have goo ball lumps in your final frosting. Heat this over med heat, stirring constantly, until it's thickened. Remove from heat and allow to cool completely. Stir occasionally while cooling so it doesn't form a skin on top. Alternately, place a piece of plastic wrap down on the surface.

Combine the fats and beat at high speed for 4 min.
Add sugar and beat at high speed for 4 min.
Add the flour paste and beat at high speed for 4 min.
Stir in vanilla.
Yields enough to fill and frost a 2 layer 8 or 9" cake.



Kathy's Notes: If I have more layers, I make 1 1/2 x which fits fine in my 4.5 qt mixer.

- Store leftovers in the fridge. Bring to room temp and rebeat before using.
- Can be frozen, but must be brought to room temp and rebeaten before using.
- Will take color, but hard to get any kind of deep/brilliant color.
- Does not pipe well w/ small tips (it's just too airy), but works great w/ a 1M star to do swirls on cupcakes. Large tips for borders are also fine.
- I've also used this in place of Cool Whip or other whipped topping in recipes that I need to make truly dairy free.
- Goes really well w/ chocolate and strawberries - dice fresh strawberries and add to part to use as the cake filling. Decorate w/ fresh strawberries and chocolate shavings.

****Marsha Winbeckler's Rolled Buttercream Recipe***

Find her book at www.winbeckler.com — it's filled with information on decorating with this medium.

1 cup Crisco

1 tsp. colorless butter flavoring

1/2 tsp. popcorn salt

1 cup clear corn syrup

1 tsp. colorless vanilla flavoring

7-8 cups (slightly less than 2 lbs.) powdered sugar

Place shortening and corn syrup in mixing bowl and beat until creamy. Add flavorings and salt and beat until blended. Mix in powdered sugar all at one time and blend thoroughly. The mixture will be very stiff. Turn icing onto work surface and knead until smooth and well blended. Store icing in sealed plastic bag then place bag in airtight container. Icing can be refrigerated for several weeks or frozen for several months. Let come to room temperature before using.