

MAKING FLAVORED BUTTER

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Drizzle flavored butter over roast veggies, slather it on warm rolls or melt it on top of a steak. Any way you slice it, that extra boost of flavor makes delicious food taste even better.

One of my favorite summer activities is popping out the back door to my herb garden, snipping a few stems and making flavored butter (also known as compound butter). The good news is fresh herbs are available year round in nearly every grocery store today, so I can make flavored butter even when the snow's flying. Even better, flavored butters can be frozen for up to six months, so I can enjoy them anytime. I'm partial to herbal butters – parsley-chive, rosemary-lemon, sage-thyme – but honey, spices, citrus and cheese also lend great flavor.

The most time-consuming task is chopping and prepping – and waiting for the butter to soften if you forgot to take it out of the refrigerator. (See the note below for “How To Soften Butter Quickly” by Kelsey Mueller and Peggy Woodward). I have used pre-whipped butter to make flavored butter when I'm pressed for time, but I don't feel it has quite the same flavor or texture as butter by the stick.

Pro Tip: I use unsalted butter when making flavored butters so I can control the amount of salt. Although recipes don't necessarily call for salt, 1/8 to 1/4 teaspoon (or to taste) can be added to boost the flavor, if desired. When making herbal butters, you can also add a small squirt of fresh lemon juice to perk things up a bit if the recipe doesn't call for it. The fun is in experimenting.

FLAVORED BUTTER BASIC TECHNIQUE

1. With the butter at room temperature, whip it with an electric mixer or with a spoon or spatula until it is smooth and soft.
2. Gently stir in your chopped herbs (wash and dry them thoroughly first), zest or other fresh ingredients. If you're using dry spices, mix them together first so they incorporate evenly throughout the butter.
3. Scoop the flavored butter onto parchment paper or plastic wrap and roll it into a log shape. Twist the ends closed, wrap it in foil and place it in the refrigerator or freezer to chill and harden. Frozen butter can easily be sliced with a sharp knife that's been run under hot water.

Make It Pretty

Pro Tip: Hosting a fancy dinner party soon? Mix up your favorite flavored butter and spread it into decorative candy molds to chill and harden in the freezer. Pop it out of the molds, place it on a pretty plate, and serve the flavored butter with your favorite breads or over roasted vegetables for an elegant touch.

HOW TO SOFTEN BUTTER QUICKLY

Kelsey Mueller and Peggy Woodward, RDN

How Long Does It Take To Soften Butter?

Left on the countertop at room temperature, a stick of butter takes at least 45 minutes to soften. If you're the type who plans ahead, that's no big deal. If not, here are a few ways to soften butter quickly.

How to Soften Butter Fast

You'll need:

Butter (as much as the recipe calls for)

Method 1: Fairly Fast

Our first method is the easiest: Simply cut the butter into cubes. The smaller the pieces, the quicker they'll come to room temperature.

Cut the butter stick in half so you have two long rectangles side by side. Stack them together and slice again. This yields four butter strips. Keep them stacked, and then slice perpendicular to your cuts. The butter will fall into cubes, and the cubes will soften fairly quickly, in about 15 minutes. (Now's a good time to measure and prep the remaining ingredients.)

Method 2: Faster

The second method is more labor-intensive, but it will help the butter soften even faster. With a rolling pin, roll or pound the butter out flat. Whether rolling or pounding, the friction will warm the butter and the broader surface area will encourage faster softening.

Test Kitchen Tip: To minimize the mess, we like to flatten the butter between two sheets of waxed paper. This prevents the butter from sticking to the rolling pin or the countertop. Brilliant.

Method 3: Super Fast

The last method, shredding, creates a dirty dish, but it's the quickest of the three. Partially unwrap the butter (use the wrapped half as a handle to keep your hand clean) and shred it using the largest holes of your box grater. The butter will reduce to a fluffy heap, similar in appearance to shredded mozzarella cheese.

The principle here is the same as in the first method: Smaller pieces soften faster. Shredded butter is ready to use in your recipe right away.

Test Kitchen Tip:

We also like to use this method when we're making a pie crust, which actually requires cold butter. In this case, we freeze the stick of butter before grating it. This creates small, hard pieces of butter that help make any crust tender and flaky.

Method 4: The Lazy Way

If you're feeling lucky, you can forego the aforementioned methods. Just place the butter and sugar into a stand mixer, and start creaming on low speed. (Higher speeds increase the likelihood that butter will catapult out of the bowl.) You'll need to increase the mixing time to allow for the butter to warm and soften and for the aeration of the creaming process to take place.