



Ultranutty Pecan Bars

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS:

Pecan bars usually take the lead from pecan pie and are more about a thick, custardy filling than the pecans. We wanted a bar cookie that made the nuts the main focus. For the filling, we increased the amount of pecans to a full pound and tossed them in a thick mixture of brown sugar, corn syrup, and melted butter for an easy dump-and-stir filling that spread itself evenly in the oven. With so many nuts, our pecan bars have varying textures, some parts chewy and some crunchy. By using melted butter, we were able to create an easy press-in crust (no need for the food processor). And since we eliminated the wet custardy filling, the crust also didn't need parbaking. A final sprinkling of flaky sea salt elevates the flavor and appearance of the treat.

Makes 24 bars

It is important to use pecan halves, not pieces. The edges of the bars will be slightly firmer than the center. If desired, trim 1/4 inch from the edges before cutting into bars. Toast the pecans on a rimmed baking sheet in a 350-degree oven until fragrant, 8 to 12 minutes, shaking the sheet halfway through.

INGREDIENTS

Crust

- 1 3/4** cups (8 3/4 ounces) all-purpose flour
- 6** tablespoons (2 2/3 ounces) sugar
- 1/2** teaspoon salt
- 8** tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

Topping

- 3/4** cup packed (5 1/4 ounces) light brown sugar
- 1/2** cup light corn syrup
- 7** tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and hot
- 1** teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/2** teaspoon salt
- 4** cups (1 pound) pecan halves, toasted
- 1/2** teaspoon flake sea salt (optional)

INSTRUCTIONS

1. FOR THE CRUST: Adjust oven rack to lowest position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Make foil sling for 13 by 9-inch baking pan by folding 2 long sheets of aluminum foil; first sheet should be 13 inches wide and second sheet should be 9 inches wide. Lay sheets of foil in pan perpendicular to each other, with extra foil hanging over edges of pan. Push foil into corners and up sides of pan, smoothing foil flush to pan. Lightly spray foil with vegetable oil spray.

2. Whisk flour, sugar, and salt together in medium bowl. Add melted butter and stir with wooden spoon until dough begins to form. Using your hands, continue to combine until no dry flour remains and small portion of dough holds together when squeezed in palm of your hand. Evenly scatter tablespoon-size pieces of dough over surface of pan. Using your fingertips and palm of your hand, press and smooth dough into even thickness in bottom of pan.

- 3. FOR THE TOPPING:** Whisk sugar, corn syrup, melted butter, vanilla, and salt together in medium bowl until smooth (mixture will look separated at first but will become homogeneous), about 20 seconds. Fold pecans into sugar mixture until nuts are evenly coated.
- 4.** Pour topping over crust. Using spatula, spread topping over crust, pushing to edges and into corners (there will be bare patches). Bake until topping is evenly distributed and rapidly bubbling across entire surface, 23 to 25 minutes.
- 5.** Transfer pan to wire rack and lightly sprinkle with flake sea salt, if using. Let bars cool completely in pan on rack, about 1 1/2 hours. Using foil overhang, lift bars out of pan and transfer to cutting board. Cut into 24 bars. (Bars can be stored at room temperature for up to 5 days.)

TECHNIQUE

PRETOASTING NUTS BEFORE BAKING

For deep nutty flavor, don't rely on baking to brown nuts. Toast beforehand.

We're always surprised when recipes for baked goods that call for nuts don't specify toasting them first. Like browning meat or caramelizing sugar, the simple act of toasting nuts makes them taste remarkably more complex. Toasting not only produces Maillard browning reactions that create hundreds of new flavor compounds but also brings the nuts' oils to the surface, where they oxidize and produce rich, roasted aromas. But baking nuts as part of a bar cookie or quick bread isn't enough to produce these results. Nuts need to reach at least 300 degrees and be held there for several minutes for significant browning to occur. Nuts folded into batter or cookie dough won't rise above the temperature of the crumb's interior, which is done at about 200 degrees. Nuts used as a topping can reach higher temperatures, but only after any surrounding moisture has burned off, which doesn't give them enough time to brown before the item is taken out of the oven.

To prove the point, we baked two batches of our Ultranutty Pecan Bars, one made according to the recipe with toasted nuts and the other made with untoasted nuts. Though the caramelized glaze helped to darken both nuts, the pretoasted ones were noticeably more brown and tasted more complex.

TECHNIQUE

TECHNIQUE: HOW TO TOAST NUTS

Nuts (especially irregularly shaped ones) toast more evenly in the oven, but the stovetop is more convenient for amounts less than 1 cup. To avoid overbrowning, transfer toasted nuts to a plate to cool.

IN THE OVEN: Spread nuts in single layer on rimmed baking sheet and toast in preheated 350-degree oven until fragrant and slightly darkened, 8 to 12 minutes, shaking sheet halfway through to prevent burning (for smaller nuts like pine nuts, check them earlier).



ON THE STOVETOP: Place nuts in single layer in dry skillet set over medium heat and toast, stirring frequently, until fragrant and slightly darkened, 3 to 5 minutes.



TECHNIQUE

TOPPING CLUMPS? NOT TO WORRY

To streamline our Ultranutty Pecan Bars recipe, we skipped the step of heating the topping on the stovetop. Instead, we stirred the ingredients together off heat and spread the thick mixture as best we could over the crust. Don't worry if there are bare patches: The topping melts during baking, distributing itself evenly over the crust.

