

The Mix I Mastered

By Lisa Yockelson

The tidy little box in white, blue and red beckoned from the grocery shelf. And not in a tempting way. The name, announced in capital letters and embraced in a set of quotes as “JIFFY®” – with the words “corn muffin mix” below – were illustrated by nothing more than a photograph of one whole muffin and one split muffin graced with a single pat of butter. These are not winner-of-a-beauty-contest muffins.

A basic, no-nonsense description of what you need to get from box to table – “add egg and milk” – failed at first glance to seduce. What’s more, the product announced itself as “America’s Favorite.”

What? Did I miss that contest?

Yet Jiffy’s plain-spoken, vaguely retro appeal taunted me week after week as I sped through the baking aisle, moving the requisite flour, sugar, leavening and spices from shelf to cart. Such a precious little box, only 3 inches wide and 5 ½ inches high, priced at 49 cents. That’s less than two quarters for the promise of six to eight muffins, or 10 to 12 pancakes, or one 8-inch johnnycake, or three 7-inch waffles.

But I am probably the hardest sell – ever – that the little 8.5 ounce box has endured since Michigan’s Chelsea Milling Company introduced it in 1950, 20 years after Mabel Holmes invented the company’s original all-purpose baking mix. Others embrace convenience, but I am not from-a-mix sort of baker.

Still, I was eventually overcome by curiosity. I slunk into

the store late on a balmy Monday evening and bought two boxes with what I imagine to be the same fear as that of being caught in a midnight tryst. With cash in hand to avoid providing any type of identification, I paid for and checked out two boxes of Jiffy myself, triple-bagged them and walked briskly to the car. I stashed the boxes in a remote part of my pantry. Out of sight. Never purchased. Right.

The boxes went unopened for months. After all, I was creating my own tender, corn-infused baked goods: breads, muffins, biscuits, scones, waffles. Is there any competition for homemade? Then came the dream: Clad in a fluttery white gown, my late mother (who banned mixes of any sort from the kitchen) chastised me from her deathbed for

buying Jiffy. Lovely: now a curse was attached to the purchase.

Weeks passed. A surplus of gorgeous blueberries picked on a steamy July afternoon somehow tamed that haunting middle-of-the-night episode, and I unearthed those boxes from the cupboard. My thought process went something like this:

1. Too many blueberries.
2. Not a crumb of anything baked and breakfast-y in sight (a rarity).
3. Weekend guests arriving in four hours.
4. Open both boxes, double the recipe, add blueberries to mix, bake in deep cylindrical muffin pans.

Whoa! The blueberries locked themselves into a golden batter, pleasingly and slightly gritty, not too sweet. The next



week, after another carload of berries appeared on my countertop, I made a blueberry dessert soup, a blueberry pound cake and sour cream blueberry muffins from scratch. Then I dashed to the store to buy a half-dozen boxes of the mix, this time in broad daylight. Never mind the curse; this was great stuff. The new stash of mix was used for breakfast waffles and pancakes, with the remaining blueberries folded through to create fruity pools of flavor.

My box-baking continued playfully and with only a bit of a deviation from the recipe. I whisked in melted butter, then baked the batter in a heart-shaped pan, in tea-cake-size muffin cups, in miniature loaf pans, in a preheated cast-iron skillet. The heart-shaped

cornbread fed a group of four picnickers charmingly; the baby muffins accompanied a late-summer fried chicken dinner; the petite loaves were used as shortcake, split and lavished with sautéed and lightly sugared peaches, still warm and softly whipped cream; the skillet cornbread partnered with roasted pork and simmered greens for supper on a chilly autumn night.

Then I went the savory route, with another six boxes of the mix. Freshly scraped corn kernels, passed through a little sizzling butter and tossed with chopped thyme, flavored one batch while bits of red and green pepper and crumbles of crisp bacon flecked another. Each time, the tops of the muffins were sprinkled with a few particles of sea salt.

Having exhausted the muffin repertoire, I moved on to the waffle iron and pancake griddle. I was not disappointed. With a little more milk (as the recipe calls for), and substituting melted butter for the same amount of the recommended “melted shortening.” The quick breads were coming faster than consumption could handle. Some of the same flavoring agents used for the sweet and savory experiments were put to use: Blueberries fared best, as did chopped fresh herbs and kernels of corn. I also griddled an herb-only savory batter as waffle sticks and served those as bread with spicy grilled pork. Heartened by the results, I added a few tablespoons of shredded extra-sharp cheddar cheese to the waffle batter, which was delicious (but make sure your iron is well seasoned

before using a cheesy mixture; the ooze can create a sticky situation).

The appeal of this modest box is evident on more than one level (though vegetarians should be aware that animal shortening is among the ingredients). The muffins compare favorably to from-scratch cornbread, with its rounded corn flavor. The look is delightful: Directions on the box suggest, “For maximum crown on muffins, let batter rest for 3 to 4 minutes, re-stir before filling cups,” and that works perfectly – something I certainly can’t say for homemade batter. The dry ingredients cordially receive lots of different additions. Though the taste of the baked bread is better when whole milk is used, I have had good results with skim milk, and

buttermilk proved a tangy alternative.

An upgrade that meets with raves at my table involves just a little more butter: After a whole cornbread is nudged out of its baking pan, I brush 1 to 2 tablespoons of melted salted butter over the top. Delicious.

Although none of the Chelsea Milling Co.’s other mixes has tempted me, I have found happiness with “America’s Favorite,” which the company says has been among the country’s top-selling dry goods for decades. By now, more than a year after I first started playing with it, I think of Jiffy Corn Muffin mix as another pantry staple – and not an emergency item, either. My late mother apparently would approve, as I have had no further nightmares to the contrary.

TO MAKE JIFFY MORE SPIFFY

To an 8.5 ounce box of Jiffy Corn Muffin Mix, you can add any of the following:

2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and cooled (alone or with other additions, including cheese, berries and herbs)

¼ cup shredded cheddar cheese

1/3 cup freshly scraped corn kernels sautéed in 1 tablespoon unsalted butter, tossed with 2 teaspoons fresh thyme leaves and cooled

2 tablespoons chopped herbs, such as a mix of parsley leaves, thyme and oregano (but not rosemary or sage, which would be too pungent)

2/3 cup blueberries, picked over and tossed with 2 teaspoons of the corn muffin mix; lightly stir in the berries during the final few stirs of mixing

2 strips of good smoked bacon, fried until crisp, then crumbled

¼ cup finely diced green, yellow or red bell pepper, sautéed in 1 tablespoon unsalted butter and cooled

3 tablespoons minced onion, sautéed in 1 tablespoon unsalted butter for about 3 minutes, until glossy, and cooled

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