

Gourmet

THE BEST CHRISTMAS CAKE EVER

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Caroline Bates, a *Gourmet* magazine editor for 51 years, returns to divulge a holiday dessert recipe that may change your life. She also shares a remarkable seven-decade retrospective of the cake that interweaves the magazine's history with her own



Turning the brittle pages of my mother's recipe book, I'm surprised by how many of the recipes are for cakes. But I shouldn't be: In my family, any occasion, or none at all, was an excuse to bake a cake. "Orange Cake." (For my birthday. Always.) "Tomato Soup Cake." (We teased our friends to name the mystery ingredient.) "Applesauce Spice Cake." (My first cake—I made it at the age of 8, with a little help and a lift from a kitchen chair, and I was so proud of what I'd done that I cried inconsolably when my family finished it off at dinner.) When I come to the page with "The Best Christmas Cake," its ingredients barely legible (though I know them by heart), forgotten chapters of my life return. It is the cake I'm closest to, even though I make it only once a year. I love the ritual dicing of the sticky fruits and raisins; the delicious messiness of mixing the batter with my hands; the first rich, mellow bite when the cake emerges, slightly boozy, from its long darkness. It would have pleased my mother to know that her fruitcake became my "best" cake, too.

1940 We're only going to the grocery store, so why am I told to put on my best dress? Why is my mother wearing her church clothes and the fancy feathered cloche that looks like a rumped blue jay on a nest? Because S. S. Pierce Co. is no A&P. I stare at the lavish cakes and pastries and the butchers in their straw hats, black bow ties, and immaculate white coats. I've never been in a grocery store so grand, and I'm not sure my suddenly flustered mother has either.

A courtly man approaches and bows slightly. "May I help you, madame?" "Holiday fruits, please," she says in the stilted manner my sisters deride as "putting on airs," though in kinder moments they say it's her way of handling uncomfortable situations. He guides us down aisles of exotic China teas, English marmalades, and tins with mysterious contents. Terrapin stew. What could that be? Arriving at the candied fruits, I catch my breath with pleasure. Are these the sugarplums that dance through Christmas dreams? Happier now, my mother finds her natural voice. "Two pounds of the cherries and two more of the pineapple. I'll take lemon and orange peels, too, perhaps a pound of each, and half a pound of citron. Do you have Muscat raisins?" Of course they do. S. S. Pierce has everything anyone would ever ask for, even a doorman dressed like a character in *A Christmas Carol*.

Tagged as "the dreamy child" who can't be trusted with a knife, I watch wistfully as my mother cuts up the glistening fruits. But the best part comes when I help mix them into the batter, plunging my arms into the spicy mixture all the way up to my elbows and licking off bits of cherry and citron. Baked, cooled, and swaddled in cheesecloth soaked in brandy, the cake is put away to age in a dark corner of the pantry where I forget all about it. When it reappears, buried under marzipan and a glossy icing that drips icicles down the sides, it lights up a table already decorated with mince tarts, Swedish butter cookies, miniature plum puddings, and Aunt Alice's handmade ribbon candy in stripes and pastels. Whenever I dwell on the lean times my family went through, I check myself and remember how rich we were one Christmas.

1959 In my second year at *Gourmet*, the editorial staff are dreaming of a Smithfield ham just like the one the magazine's editor and publisher, Earle MacAusland, had given us last year. "No gifts for you this year," our Scrooge of a business manager says with a mean smile. But Mr. Mac does remember everyone. As he hands out pecan fruitcakes from a favored Texas advertiser, we thank him profusely and privately wonder what to do with them. Barbara has a plan. She offers hers to the first person she runs into on West 57th Street outside our office in the Plaza Hotel. He looks at the label and says, "No, thanks."

How bad can it be? I've never tasted commercial fruitcake, so I take mine home and cut two slices. My husband chews his thoughtfully. "I guess it's okay, if you like pecans." But it's not okay. It's horribly sweet and sticky with corn syrup. Worse, the fruits have a harsh chemical taste, as if they've been doused with a cleaning solution. I can do better than that, I think to myself, so why not try? I haven't even eaten fruitcake since leaving home, but I have my mother's recipe. The chunky fruits in garish colors from the neighborhood Gristedes aren't very appealing, but as I dice them finer I feel an unexpected surge of happiness. My husband looks into the kitchen. "Are you making something with those?" he asks hopefully. That's a surprise. He hasn't shown much interest in my baking since I joined *Gourmet* and began experimenting with elaborate Viennese and French cakes. My masterpiece, a gorgeous marjolaine that I fancied even Fernand Point would have admired, drew the polite response "That must have taken a long time to make."

But he sniffs the air expectantly as the warm, spicy smell of fruitcake drifts through our apartment. He hangs around when I turn the cakes out to cool. "Be careful," he warns. "They look fragile." He offers to wrap them in cheesecloth and asks me every other day if they're ready to eat. By New Year's Eve, they really still need more aging, but I frost one anyway, and we welcome 1960 with fruitcake and port. "Let's make this an annual tradition," he says as I cut him a second slice. I smile.

1960 I know good ingredients matter, but I never made the connection with fruitcake until Jane Montant, *Gourmet's* librarian [later editor-in-chief, from 1980 to 1991], shared a thrilling discovery. "You'll love the seasonal shop I found on Third Avenue," she says one November day. "It hasn't a name, but I call it

Signora Dolce's. You'll see why." As we peer into the dim interior, a cluster of wooden barrels filled with the most beautiful candied fruits I've ever seen comes into focus—cherries so red they glow in the dark; thick halves of orange and lemon; translucent shards of citron the color of fine jade; pineapple slices shimmering like gold—all cloaked in a thick syrup. "Pure sugar," Jane whispers. "It's almost medieval."

A shy Italian woman steps out of the shadows. Reaching into a barrel, she fishes out two cherries and hands one to each of us. Jane and I take a bite and exchange astonished glances. Where do such extraordinary fruits come from? Sicily, it seems, which is the woman's home, too. I buy pounds of everything—more than enough to keep us in fruitcake through spring and plenty for holiday breads and family gifts. I mail small cakes off to my brother and sisters and imagine how pleased they will be. Weeks pass without a word. Did the cakes go missing in the mail? Making a discreet inquiry, I'm crushed to learn they don't like fruitcake

and never have. (Six years later, one sister shows me hers, still in its original wrapper, in the back of her refrigerator.) "I don't think anyone even tried it," I wail to a sympathetic friend. "I'm no fan of fruitcake either," she admits, "but I'm willing to try yours." I watch anxiously as she eats a small piece, and another, then pauses as if choosing her words carefully. "What can I say? It's phenomenal. I've never had fruitcake like it. Please, next year, I'll pay for the fruits if you make it for me." And I do.

1961 Craig Claiborne's *The New York Times Cook Book* is hailed as a best seller even before it reaches bookstores. When a copy arrives at *Gourmet*, where the author worked briefly as a receptionist and answered reader mail, we pore over the pages with grudging admiration and agree that it's the best all-around cookbook in years. Not that there aren't surprises. Reading through the fabulous cake collection, I'm startled to find a "Nova Scotia fruitcake" almost identical to mine. "I hate to disappoint you," my mother says when I phone her, "but it's not an old family recipe, at least not ours. I probably found it in *McCall's*." Now I have a hunch the fruitcake originated with Helen McCully, for many years the food editor of *McCall's*—and a good friend of Claiborne's.

1963 Six days before Thanksgiving, I race over to Signora Dolce's, hoping to get back to the office before my lunch hour ends. But I wait interminably as a woman ahead of me carries bag after bag of fruits to her station wagon, which the police have ticketed twice. She apologizes. "I'm shopping for my friends in Darien." *Swell*, I think, *and I'm late for work*. By the time I leave, I'm frantic as I hurry across Lexington Avenue and see a large crowd forming. Is there a fire? A traffic accident? A hysterical woman runs past me screaming, "They shot him! The President is dead!" Swept up in a swarm of sobbing strangers clinging to one another for comfort, I refuse to believe what I'm hearing. But the tear-streaked faces at the office tell me the news is true.

Eating little and sleeping less, my husband and I huddle before our small television as the assassination story unfolds and plays over and over again. When I can't bear to watch the funeral cortege one more time, I escape to the kitchen, my comfort zone, and lose myself in chopping candied fruits. As I run my fingers through the luminous pieces, the darkness lifts a little. But the grieving isn't easily put aside. Like everyone we know, we skip Thanksgiving entirely and barely acknowledge Christmas. I make the gesture of serving fruitcake on New Year's Eve, but it leaves a bittersweet taste.

1967 We've moved with our 8-year-old squirrel monkey from a studio apartment in New York City to a rented house in California that feels like a mansion. I walk back and forth through the empty rooms and sun-filled kitchen marveling at the space, the mountain views, and a yard lush with fruiting citrus trees. In a scene reminiscent of W. C. Fields and his dog in *It's a Gift*, the three of us have breakfast on the patio with freshly squeezed tangelo juice, the monkey drinking his from a tiny measuring cup. Autumn is so much like summer that I'm still padding around in shorts and bare feet when I remember it's fruitcake time. In town, even the tony market where the wealthy send their maids to shop stocks a mediocre mix of candied fruits. I buy them out of desperation, wondering if an extra jigger of rum will mask the sulfur taste. (It doesn't.)

The monkey makes happy chipping sounds when I unwrap the fruits. We have a ritual, he and I. In New York, as the arbiter of all things sweet and sugary, he preferred to eat a cherry first, expressing his pleasure with chips and catlike purrs. Now he paces impatiently on the back of a chair as I hand him one. He sniffs it, glowers at me, and hurls it to the floor. Bits of candied pineapple, orange, and lemon fall beside the rejected cherry. Signora Dolce's fruits have spoiled us all.

1971 Unable to find good candied fruits, I resolve to make them. Haven't cooks candied fruits for centuries? Whether the sweetener is honey or sugar, the preserving process, though tedious, is simple: You steep fruit in increasingly stronger solutions of hot syrup that replace the fruit's natural moisture and prevent spoilage. In June, I begin with cherries, changing and strengthening the syrup daily, and watch the fruits fatten nicely on their high-sugar diet. Just one week in, disaster strikes. Overnight, floating islets of mold form. Should I have used more sugar? I toss the batch and finally my luck improves with pineapple. But best of all are candied orange and lemon peels, which soak up syrup so quickly they don't have time to spoil. With these, I can bake a fruitcake that makes all of us purr.

1978 Almost toothless now, my severest critic can no longer chew candied fruits, but he still perches on a kitchen chair to wait for a spoonful of batter. Our world has changed in other ways, too. Now I have a

fruitcake assistant in the form of my 6-year-old son, who loves to cut parchment paper to fit the baking tins, measure and sift the flour and spices, and break eggs just as a Basque chef taught him to. I miss these holiday baking sessions, and long after he leaves home I ask him in a wistful moment what he remembers. "The shot of rum you poured for me and how soused I felt," he says without skipping a beat. I'm shocked. "I never would have done that! Maybe a tiny sip, but surely not a glass." But it's his fruitcake story, and he sticks to it.

1988 After years of writing about French cuisine and reviewing French restaurants in California, I am in France for the first time. Everything is fresh yet oddly familiar. In Nice, I fall hard for *socca* and wonder why I never find these addictive chickpea-flour cakes in California. (In the next decade, I will.) Squeezing into La Merenda beside a cute Frenchman, I learn the trick of removing mussel meat with an empty shell. On market day on the Cours Saleya, eager shoppers snap up the season's first cèpes and girolles, but I'm transfixed by a stall with bins of sparkling *fruits confits*. Though not the flawless jewels on display in the window of Henri Auer, they taste heavenly, cost much less, and sweeten the finest fruitcakes we've enjoyed since moving west. Two years later, on my first visit to Italy, I luck out again at an outdoor market in Ravenna.

2008 The card, a Gary Larson classic, depicts a goofy manger scene with the caption, "Unbeknownst to most theologians, there was a fourth wise man, who was turned away for bringing a fruitcake." Inside is a message from my son and his wife: "Don't worry. We'd never turn you or your fruitcake away from our door." But this year they might. We are living in Arizona and still finding our way around the markets. The candied-fruit situation is hopeless. "How about these?" My husband holds up a package of cactus-fruit jellies. I think he's kidding. A new friend returns from a summer in northern Michigan with a fresh crop of dried Montmorency cherries. I'm captivated by their tart-sweet complexity and decide to pair them in a cake with currants, golden raisins, orange-flavored cranberries, and a few luscious Arizona-grown Medjool dates. This is a far departure from my mother's cake, but the recipe is wonderfully flexible and forgiving. I'm not ready to give up the sparkle of candied fruits entirely, so I splurge on a pound of mail-order Italian orange peel and citron from an Oakland market. Four glacéed apricots left over from a birthday go in, too. The cake is the darkest I've ever baked, and I'm a little nervous when I bring it out during the holidays. "It's wonderful, as always," my son reassures me. My husband lifts a glass of port in a salute. "One of the best fruitcakes you've ever made." He always says that. And I smile.

THE BEST CHRISTMAS CAKE

Makes 2 cakes

Active time: 40 min

Total time: 2 days (includes fruit macerating time, but does not include aging)

INGREDIENTS

If you are mystified by the tradition of Christmas cakes (a.k.a. fruitcakes) and can't understand the passion some people hold for these fruit-filled confections, then this is the cake that will make it all clear. Although one bite is all it will take to sell you on this recipe, further bites will be impossible to resist.

The secret to this cake's seductive charms lies in the quality of the candied and dried fruits you use. If you have access to candied or glacéed fruits from Italy or southern France, consider yourself extremely lucky. If not, we have included an excellent mail-order source for imported candied fruit in the Cooks' Notes below. For the dried fruit, Trader Joe's is a great source. Although 3½ pounds of fruit, half candied and half dried, is called for, the recipe is flexible, and you can get by with 3 pounds total. But it's best to keep the proportion of candied to dried fruit the same.

Traditional English fruitcakes are often buried under layers of marzipan and fudgy frostings as thick as the cake itself. Instead, this one gets an almond glaze that lets you eat the cake and see it, too.

INGREDIENTS

For Cakes:

1 pound candied orange strips, coarsely chopped (3 cups)
6 ounces candied citron, coarsely chopped (1 cup)
6 ounces candied pineapple, glacéed apricots, or glacéed cherries, coarsely chopped (3/4 cup)
8 ounces dried Montmorency (tart) cherries, coarsely chopped (1 1/3 cups)
8 ounces (2 cups) dried currants
4 ounces golden raisins, coarsely chopped (3/4 cup)
4 ounces dried orange-flavored cranberries, coarsely chopped (1 1/3 cups)
4 ounces (about 6) dried Medjool dates, pitted and coarsely chopped (1/2 cup)
1/2 cup dark rum or brandy, plus more for soaking cheesecloth
4 ounces (1 cup) slivered almonds, toasted (see Cooks' Notes for toasting instructions), or hazelnuts, toasted and any loose skins rubbed off, then finely chopped
2 cups sifted all-purpose flour (sift before measuring), divided
1 teaspoon ground mace
1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
1 stick (1/2 cup) unsalted butter, softened, plus more for loaf pans
1 cup packed brown sugar (preferably dark)
1 cup granulated sugar
5 large eggs
2 tablespoons whole milk, divided
1/2 teaspoon pure almond extract

For Icing:

2 cups confectioners' sugar
1 teaspoon pure almond extract
2 to 4 tablespoons whole milk

EQUIPMENT:

2 (9- by 5- by 3-inch) loaf pans; 2 (20- by 18-inch) pieces cheesecloth

INSTRUCTIONS**Make Cakes:**

Combine all fruits in a large bowl and stir in rum. Cover with plastic wrap and let fruits macerate (steep) at cool room temperature overnight.

Preheat oven to 275°F with rack in middle. Butter loaf pans and line with parchment paper, leaving a 2-inch overhang on long sides.

Stir nuts and 1/2 cup flour into fruit mixture. Sift remaining 1 1/2 cups flour with spices and baking powder into another bowl.

Beat butter with an electric mixer at medium speed until creamy, then beat in brown sugar followed by granulated sugar, and beat until well incorporated, 3 to 5 minutes. Add eggs 1 at a time, beating well after each addition. At low speed, mix in flour mixture in 3 additions, beating just until batter is smooth. Stir in 1 tablespoon milk and almond extract.

Pour batter over fruit mixture and mix with a wooden spoon or your hands until well combined. Divide batter evenly between 2 pans, pressing batter down firmly (especially in corners) and smoothing tops. Lightly brush tops of cakes with remaining tablespoon milk (to prevent burning).

Bake until golden and a wooden toothpick inserted into center of cakes comes out clean, 2 1/2 to 3 hours.

Let fruitcakes cool in pans on a wire rack for 30 minutes. Turn out cakes onto rack and carefully peel off parchment paper, then let cool completely, about 3 hours.

Soak cheesecloth in a bowl with enough additional rum to thoroughly wet it, then wring out cheesecloth. Wrap loaves in cheesecloth first, then in foil, and then in resealable bags, forcing out excess air. Refrigerate for 3 to 4 days, then unwrap cakes and check cheesecloth. If it's dry, then repeat soaking in rum and wringing, and rewrap cakes. Keep cakes refrigerated for at least 1 week before icing and serving (see Cooks' Notes).

Make Icing Before Serving:

Sift confectioners' sugar into a small bowl, then whisk in almond extract and just enough milk so icing spreads easily. Ice loaves using a spoon or an offset spatula, then chill briefly to set icing, about 30 minutes.

Cakes slice best when cold. Cut into thin slices, cutting only as many slices as you plan on serving. Arrange slices on a plate and let them come to room temperature before serving.

COOKS' NOTES

To toast nuts, spread them out on a rimmed sheet pan and bake in the middle of a 350°F oven until they are golden and aromatic, 5 to 10 minutes, depending on the size and type of nut. If the nuts are dark to begin with, you will need to cut one open as you roast to check that the interior has turned golden.

The best mail-order source for beautiful candied fruits free of preservatives is [Market Hall Foods](#) in Oakland, California.

Although the fruitcakes can be eaten after only 1 week of aging, they develop a much richer taste if aged a month or more in the refrigerator. Unwrap and check the cheesecloth once a week and if it's dry, repeat soaking it in rum and wringing it out before rewrapping and refrigerating the cakes. They can also be frozen. In either case, don't ice until just before serving.

In 1958 Caroline Bates joined the staff of *Gourmet*, whose offices at the time were in the penthouse of the Plaza Hotel in New York. She spent the next 51 years with the magazine, primarily as a writer specializing in food history, travel, and restaurants. Moving to California in the late 1960s, she and her photographer-husband wrote a *Sunset* guidebook to a still-wild Baja California and produced dozens of *Gourmet* articles, many of them about native foods and great American places. In 1974, Bates began a restaurant column for *Gourmet* that chronicled the rise of farm-fresh California cuisine; the sushi craze; and the growing diversity of international cooking in the West Coast's large cities. She now lives in southeastern Arizona, where chiles fire up her cooking and bobcats snooze on her patio.

PHOTO: ROMULO YANES

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