

## Fruitcake: A Call to End Dessert-Shaming

The holiday season is in full swing and that means one thing: it is time to dust off the fruitcake jokes. But from where did the collective disdain for this sometimes boozy, always chock-full-of-fruit-and-nuts cake come? Why do people who enjoy fruitcake feel forced to do so in shameful secrecy? Was it Johnny Carson joking, “There is only one fruitcake in the entire world and people keep passing it around?” Or perhaps it goes deeper than that, when the industrialization of food shifted the fruitcake from homemade gift to mass-produced, mail-ordered wonder brick.

In the spirit of culinary neutrality and exploration — and not to mention, the holidays — it seemed appropriate to give the maligned delicacy a chance. Initial research on fruitcake unveiled immediate deceit: it is not so much a cake as it is a stout bread. This could be the root of fruitcake’s downfall: no one likes to be misled. Any perceived dishonesty is not intentional though. The modern fruitcake’s homeland is Britain, a topsy-turvy land where breads are called cake and cakes are called “pudding.” There, fruitcake also goes by the more charming and less literal “Christmas Cake,” which might help in overall branding purposes.

What about the boozy flavor, though? No matter what holiday is celebrated this time of year, it is understandable to need a little nip here and there to survive the craze. But to eat a cake (now established as a bread) soaked in alcohol does not quite fit the bill. As it turns out, this can be explained with a little bit of history too. Before the fruitcake became the butt of holiday jokes, the cake

was a way to preserve scraps of food. Going as far back as the Middle Ages and all the way to Egypt, leftover fruits and nuts were smashed into a loaf instead of tossed into the trash. The loaf would shrink as it was eaten, and then grow as more fruits and nuts were added, not unlike a bread starter. Soaking the fruit in alcohol and regularly drenching the loaf kept the whole lot moist and safe from spoiling.

If a regular soaking in alcohol is what kept the early fruitcakes palatable, then perhaps this is why the commercial versions are hallmarked by weight and dryness. With no one tending to the cake’s moisture, but instead packing it up and shipping it across the country, the cake goes dry.

Having a newfound appreciation for the fruitcake’s centuries-long journey, it seemed appropriate to try out a couple of recipes. Since the modern version has one foot planted firmly in the States and the other in Britain, comparing a recipe from each country seemed to be the equitable approach.

The American recipe is thought to have first been published by Good Housekeeping in the early 1980s. The Red Coat version is from famed British chef Nigel Slater. Since these recipes are mainly dried fruit and nuts, it should be noted that they are not inexpensive to make, something to consider since there is no certainty that the results will ever be consumed. But that’s the purpose of this article, to buck up the timid baker to choose a recipe and forge ahead.

The verdict? It is time to ease up on the fruitcake. Sure, the “American” version weighed almost five pounds and could do some serious damage if hauled

at someone in a fit of holiday rage. That heft though is a symptom of its lovely, extra-nutty texture. And the bright red and green cherries? While at first a bit off-putting in this au naturel and organic world, when dumped into a bowl with all of the other ingredients (fruitcakes are shockingly low-maintenance to make), they were actually quite pretty. The end result was a heavy cake, but there was also something heartwarming and pretty about it too.

In Nigel Slater’s recipe, the candied cherries are omitted, making this fruitcake much more subdued — not unlike the British. Though not as brightly colored as the Yankee version, the orange peel and spices gave the cake an incredibly nuanced and complex flavor, one that screamed all things winter and snuggling up by a fire-place. The recipe yields multiple smaller cakes, instead of one behemoth. This makes it the perfect gift-giving size, especially for a recipient who may be holding a fruitcake grudge. It should also be noted that both versions were so filling that the fruitcake can moonlight as a protein bar.

Will the fruitcake ever crawl back atop the holiday throne? Maybe. But only if it becomes ironic enough to be adopted by hipsters. Even if that never happens, it is time to end dessert-shaming and bring back homemade fruitcake. After all, it is the holidays. **C**

Read more of Emily Mangini’s food adventures at [www.mytartufo.com](http://www.mytartufo.com), on Twitter@mytartufo.

### The American Fruitcake

Thought to be from Good Housekeeping (circa 1980)

Ingredients:

- (2) 6.5-8 oz containers of candied red cherries
- (1) 12 oz package of pitted prunes
- (1) 10 oz container of pitted dates
- (1) 3.5-4oz container of candied green cherries
- 1/2 cup cream sherry
- 24 oz salted mixed nuts
- 6 oz of pecans
- 1.5 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 6 eggs, slightly beaten

Directions:

1. In a large bowl, combine the first five ingredients. Let stand for 15 minutes or until almost all of the liquid is absorbed, stirring occasionally.
2. Line a 10” tube pan with foil. (I found this to be a bit challenging, so I lined the bottom and the center tube-y bit, and went without covering the sides. The cake turned out just fine.)
3. Stir mixed nuts and pecans into fruit mixture. Remove 1.5 cups fruit/nut mixture and set aside.
4. Stir the flour, sugar and baking powder into the fruit mixture until everything is well coated.
5. Stir in the eggs until everything is well mixed and spoon batter into the prepared pan, packing firmly to eliminate air pockets.
6. Sprinkle reserved fruit/nut mixture on top.
7. Cover loosely with foil. Bake at 300°F for 2 hours. Remove foil and bake for 30 minutes more, or until a knife inserted in the center comes out clean, and the top of the cake is lightly browned.
8. Cool cake in the pan on a wire rack for 30 minutes; remove from pan and carefully peel off foil. Cool cake completely on rack. Wrap fruitcake tightly in foil or plastic wrap. Refrigerate.



### The British Fruitcake

A small, rich fruitcake by Nigel Slater

Yield: A deep 11cm square cake or 2 small loaf tins 13cm x 6cm.

For the fruitcake:

- 450g dried fruits (make sure the larger fruits are finely chopped)
- 3 tbsp brandy
- the grated zest and juice of a small orange
- 125g butter
- 70g light muscovado sugar
- 55g dark muscovado sugar
- 2 large eggs
- 70g hazelnuts
- 40g ground almonds
- 125g plain flour
- ½ tsp baking powder
- a knife point of ground cinnamon
- a knife point of ground nutmeg
- the merest pinch of allspice
- brandy for feeding the cake

Directions:

1. The night before, empty the dried fruits into a bowl and pour over the brandy and orange juice. Add the zest and mix. The liquid won’t cover the fruit. Give them a stir in the morning.
2. Pre-heat the oven to 320°F and set the rack to the lower half of the oven. Line the cake tin twice with parchment paper. The paper should come at least 5cm above the edge of the tin. If you’re using two tins, prepare the second one as well. With an electric mixer, beat the butter and sugars till fluffy and the texture of soft ice cream.
3. In a small bowl, beat the eggs lightly. A little at a time, add the eggs to the creamed butter and sugar. If the mixture curdles slightly, mix in 1 tbsp or 2 of the flour. Add the dried fruits, ground almonds and whole hazelnuts.
4. Mix the flour, baking soda and spices. A heaped tablespoon at a time, add the dry ingredients to the cake mixture. Spoon batter into prepared tin(s), and bake for 1 hour without opening the door.
5. After 1 hour, turn the temperature down to 300°F. Let the cake cook for another 1½ hours. If it appears to be browning a little too quickly, place a piece of parchment or foil over the top. If you’re baking with two little loaf tins, cut the cooking time by 30 minutes.
6. Remove the cake from the heat and let it cool in its tin. When the cake is cold, wrap it, still in its paper, in foil or plastic wrap and leave in a cool place.
7. “Feed” with brandy every week until you ice it. Unwrap the foil, peel back the paper and pierce the underside of the cake with a metal skewer several times. Spoon over a little brandy - it will disappear into the cake. Wrap it up and set it aside for another week.
8. To cover an 11cm cake you will need about 400g almond paste and icing made with 2 egg whites and about 500g icing sugar.

For the icing (optional):

- 2 egg whites
- 500g powdered sugar
- a little lemon juice, rosewater or orange blossom water

Whisk egg whites lightly, just enough to break them up and give a faint head of bubbles. Sift in the sugar and mix to a smooth paste thick enough to spread. It will seem too thick at first, but keep going. Add a couple of teaspoons of lemon juice or flower water. Scoop the icing out over the almond paste, smooth it out and decorate as you wish.

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