



## FRUITCAKE YOU WANT TO EAT

**F**RUITCAKES ARE PRIMARILY about storage. Many recipes suggest that when made with liquor-soaked fruit and wrapped in cheesecloth soaked in more booze, fruitcakes can be stored in a cool place for years. This is not a comforting thought for a modern cook but would clearly appeal to folks who lived before the advent of refrigeration.

The question then is, how does one make a fruitcake that is worth eating? My first step was to eliminate any sort of candied fruit, substituting instead dried fruits. I also discarded the notion of using any sugary coating such as fondant. The English are fond of this approach, but I find it beyond the pale of either good taste or sensible cooking.

This left me with a simple cake batter into which is folded a whole lot of liquor-soaked dried fruit. There is in fact a long tradition of this rather simple approach to fruitcakes. James Beard in *American Cookery* writes about fruitcakes that are no more than pound cakes with fruit added. In my 1917 edition of *A New Book of Cookery*, by Fannie Merritt Farmer, however, the recipe for fruitcake uses no butter and eggs, simply a mixture of raisins, whole wheat flour, white flour, sugar, molasses, coffee, baking powder, and spices. This would be a much heavier approach. I have also come across recipes calling for the addition of ale (this recipe tasted very sour to me) and many recipes based on yeast breads, which are more difficult to make and taste more like stollen or panettone than fruitcake.

So I chose to work with a simple spiced butter cake as the base for this recipe, adding nuts and real dried fruits to make it a fruitcake. This approach was easy, fresh, and produced a cake that could be eaten immediately, rather than one that needed a month of storage. I then tried three recipes for comparison: the Four Seasons'

Christmas Fruitcake from *Classic Home Desserts*, Rich Fruitcake from *La Varenne Pratique* (Anne Willan), and Dark Fruitcake from *Joy of Cooking*. The first lesson was that soaking the fruit in liquor was a good alternative to soaking the entire cake in cheesecloth-drenched liquor. The second observation was that eggs were indeed important. Recipe C (see chart), which used no eggs, was much too dry. Candied fruits were definitely out, since real dried fruit was tastier. The ratio of fruit to cake was also important — too little fruit, and the cake was dry and dull; too much, and the flavor was overwhelming and the cake too dense. So my working recipe now included 3 cups of dried fruit, 1½ cups flour, spices and salt, 16 tablespoons butter, ½ cup sugar, 3 eggs, ½ cup molasses, and a cup of toasted, chopped pecans.

So far so good, but the cake was not quite rich enough. I decided to start reworking the recipe with the fruit. I doubled the amount of fruit to roughly 6 cups, using a combination of dates, apricots, prunes, and raisins. Instead of soaking the fruit for only 1 hour in liquor, I went for an overnight soak, which did complicate the recipe but also improved the flavor substantially. Next I experimented with the cake. To deepen the flavor, I decided to add coffee, thinking that it would offer depth of flavor without sweetness. So at the same time, I increased the molasses to ¾ cup (from ½ cup) and then added ½ cup strong coffee. This was a big improvement. I then tried using brown sugar for granulated, and this was not successful. Since I had so much molasses in the recipe to start with, the regular white sugar was a better choice; the brown sugar simply muddled the flavor. With all of this extra fruit and with the addition of coffee, the cake was a bit on the wet side, so I added ½ cup flour and 1 more egg. The cake was rich and moist without being wet. Voilà! Now I had a fruitcake worth eating.

## CASE 33: HOLD THAT FRUITCAKE!

What is fruitcake really made of, and why doesn't it taste better?

Ingredient	Recipe A	Recipe B	Recipe C
Fruit	1 pound dried	3 $\frac{1}{3}$ cups raisins, 3 $\frac{1}{3}$ cups currants, 1 cup candied orange peel, 1 cup candied citrus peel	2 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups mixed candied fruit, 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups dates, 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups currants, 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups golden raisins
Nuts	2 cups chopped walnuts	None	2 cups chopped walnuts
Flour	2 $\frac{2}{3}$ cups	3 cups	3 cups
Spices	2 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons cinnamon, 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons allspice, 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons nutmeg, $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon ground coriander	$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon nutmeg, $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon allspice	1 teaspoon cinnamon, 1 teaspoon nutmeg, $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon mace, $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon ground cloves
Baking powder/ baking soda	2 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons baking powder	None	1 teaspoon baking powder, $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon baking soda
Salt	$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon	$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon	$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon
Butter	22 tablespoons	24 tablespoons	16 tablespoons
Sugar/molasses	1 $\frac{3}{4}$ cups granulated sugar, 2 tablespoons confectioners'	1 $\frac{3}{4}$ cups brown sugar	2 cups brown sugar, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup molasses
Eggs	9	6	None
Other	Zest of 1 lemon, zest of 2 oranges, rum as needed to soak the fruit overnight	3 tablespoons brandy	$\frac{3}{4}$ cup brandy, zest and juice of 1 orange and 1 lemon

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## Fruitcake Worth Eating

*This recipe produces two loaves that can be eaten right away and do not have to sit. The fruit, not the cake itself, is soaked overnight in liquor, and the addition of coffee deepens the flavor. You will find that the rum-soaked fruit packs a pretty good wallop, so this is not the sort of fruitcake you should be serving to the kids. These loaves will keep for up to a month in a cool, dark place. Wrap first in cheesecloth and then in plastic wrap.*

### MAKES 2 LARGE LOAVES

- ¾ cup dark raisins
- ¾ cup golden raisins
- 1 cup dried apricots, roughly chopped
- 1 cup pitted prunes, roughly chopped
- 2 cups pitted dates, roughly chopped
- 1 cup rum or bourbon
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon nutmeg
- ½ teaspoon allspice
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ pound (2 sticks) unsalted butter, softened but still firm
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- 4 large eggs
- ¾ cup molasses
- ½ cup strong coffee
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 cup toasted, chopped pecans

1. Soak the raisins, apricots, prunes, and dates in rum for about 8 hours or overnight.

2. Adjust a rack to the middle position and heat oven to 300 degrees. Grease and flour two 9 x 5-inch loaf pans. Alternatively, line bottoms of two loaf pans with parchment paper. Sift together the flour, spices, and salt onto a piece of waxed paper.

3. In a large bowl, beat the butter until light, about 2 minutes with an electric mixer. Add the sugar and beat an additional 2 minutes. Add the

eggs, one at a time, and beat for 20 seconds after each addition. Add the molasses, coffee, and vanilla and beat about 30 seconds more, or until thoroughly combined. Add the dry ingredients and beat by hand or on the lowest speed of the mixer until combined. Add the fruit and rum and the nuts and fold with a rubber spatula until combined. Pour the batter into prepared pans and smooth tops with the spatula.

4. Bake for 65 to 75 minutes, or until the top feels firm to the touch.