

CHRISTMAS CAKE

SERVES: 8–10

For those who have never made their own Christmas cake, I urge you to try mine. It fits in nicely with today's busy routines in that the fruit can be left to soak in the morning before heading out to work (or even left for up to a week if you've got other things to do). The mixing is straight forward and then – best of all – the cake bakes during the night while you sleep, cooking in a very low oven for ten hours. You will come downstairs the next morning to that warm comforting aroma of Christmas spice. Then you take your cake out of the oven, leave it in the tin on a cooling rack then when you come home from work remove it from the tin (leaving the baking paper on as it helps to keep everything moist), wrap it in foil and pop into a tin until nearer to Christmas.

I usually make my Christmas cake in October and store it until two weeks before Christmas. My cake doesn't need feeding because the low, slow bake ensures it doesn't dry out and the cake is moist. If you have a tabletop (stand) mixer this cake is so easy to make you will never buy one again.

Finally – consider the cost saving! A 23cm (9 inch) Christmas cake will only cost about £9 to make. Christmas cakes, especially mini cakes, make great gifts.

Using my cake converter on pages 16–19 the recipe below can be scaled up or down, square to round. As a rough rule of thumb, I adjust the baking time as follows: for every 2.5cm (1 inch) reduction in size of cake tin, I reduce the baking time

by 1 hour; for every 2.5cm (1 inch) increase in size, I increase the baking time by an hour. If you have a temperature probe, the internal baked temperature needs to read between 92–94°C.

100g (3½oz) morello or glacé cherries
1kg (2lb 4oz) mixed dried fruit and peel
4 tbsp Cointreau, brandy, sherry or juice from the orange
(after zesting)
finely grated zest and juice of 1 orange
finely grated zest and juice of 1 lemon
250g (9oz) butter
250g (9oz) soft dark brown sugar
5 eggs, beaten in a jug
1 tbsp golden syrup or black treacle
250g (9oz) plain flour
1 tsp ground mace (or ½ tsp ground nutmeg)
1 tsp mixed spice
1 tsp ground ginger
½ tsp ground cinnamon

Equipment: tabletop (stand) mixer, 23cm (9 inch) round cake tin, bottom and sides greased and lined with greaseproof paper or baking parchment

Mini Christmas cakes

This recipe will also make 9 × 7.5cm (3 inch) mini Christmas cakes which need to bake for 5 hours.

*Do I need to buy special small tins
for mini Christmas cakes?*

Mini Christmas cakes can work out to be expensive. Instead, save small baked bean tins. Remove the top and the base with a can opener and you will be left with a metal sleeve. Remove the label of course, give it a good wash then line with a ribbon of baking parchment and place on a baking sheet lined with paper. Don't worry that there is no base to the tin – the mixture is very thick and will not leak out at the bottom.

First thing in the morning, rinse the cherries in cold water to remove the sticky glaze, dry them, then cut them into thirds, then put the mixed fruit and cut cherries in a large bowl and add the Cointreau or other liquid, fruit zests and juices. Stir, cover with a plate or lid, then leave until the evening. The fruit can be left in a cool place for a number of days and even up to a week.

Preheat the oven to 120°C/100°C (fan)/250°F/gas ½.

In the evening, when you are ready to mix the cake batter, cream the butter and brown sugar in the bowl of a tabletop (stand) mixer fitted with the whisk attachment until pale, light and fluffy. Blitz the beaten eggs in the jug with a stick blender, or beat well a hand whisk, to make sure the egg is well mixed, then, with the mixer on medium speed, pour the egg into the butter and sugar mix in a very thin and steady stream, increasing the speed of the whisk as the mixture becomes thinner. This method should avoid any curdling. If you see that the mixture is starting to split (curdle) then add a tablespoon of

the measured flour, bring the mixture back to a smooth consistency then continue adding the rest of the egg and, finally, the syrup and treacle. Change the whisk to the paddle attachment and add the flour and spices. Fold in the soaked fruits.

Transfer the mix to the prepared tin and bake in the oven for 10 hours. I usually put the cake into the oven at 10pm and take it out at 8am the next day. Allow the cake to cool completely in the tin then remove, leave on the papers, wrap in foil and store in a tin until ready to decorate at Christmas.

ICING YOUR CHRISTMAS CAKE

MARZIPAN LAYER

- 1.25kg (2lb 12oz) room-temperature marzipan
- 1–2 tbsp brandy or other alcohol, for brushing

Roll out the marzipan larger than the surface area of the cake to be covered. To do this, take a length of string and allow 2.5cm (1 inch) at the bottom then use the length of string to take up the side of the cake, across the top, down the side opposite and allow an extra 2.5cm (1 inch) at the base. This length of string is the length and width of the circle you need to roll to. You can dust the work surface with icing sugar for rolling out the marzipan, but this can cause the marzipan to dry out and crack, so I prefer to roll the marzipan between two sheets of plastic.

Just before covering the cake with marzipan, brush it all over with brandy (or other alcohol) to give it a sticky surface. This will also destroy any bacteria that could start to grow. For an extra-smooth flat surface, I often turn my cake upside down

and cover the base and transfer the bobbly top surface to the underneath, so the base of the cake is uppermost and the part that gets iced.

Once rolled out, peel the top piece of plastic off the marzipan and use the other piece as an aid to centre the marzipan over the cake. Use cake smoothers dipped in icing sugar to smooth out the marzipan and eliminate any air bubbles then leave uncovered in a cool place for a few days to dry out. This will avoid any oil seeping from the marzipan into the white icing when you ice it.

You can now choose to cover the marzipan layer with either fondant icing or royal icing.

FONDANT ICING

1kg (2lb 4oz) fondant icing

Use the marzipan rolling-out method for the fondant icing, but use a brushing of water instead of alcohol to brush the marzipan before laying over the fondant. Use cake smoothers dipped in icing sugar to smooth out the icing and eliminate any air bubbles.

This recipe will cover a 23cm (9 inch) cake or 9 mini cakes.

MARZIPAN AND ROYAL ICING

2 egg whites

400g (14oz) icing sugar, sifted

½ tsp lemon juice

½ tsp glycerine

Equipment: hand-held electric whisk

Beat the egg whites in a clean, roomy mixing bowl with a hand-held electric whisk just to a frothy stage then stir in the icing sugar one large spoonful at a time. When mixed and smooth, stir through the lemon juice and glycerine then beat by hand or with a hand-held electric whisk for 5 minutes until very thick, glossy and smooth. (The addition of glycerine prevents the icing from setting like concrete.) Cover the bowl with a damp cloth when not in use as it will start to dry out if not using straight away, or keep in a sealed plastic box for up to 4 days. For a 'snow scene', you want it to have a thick consistency, with the icing standing in peaks. For a pipeable icing, add more lemon juice to thin it down.

This recipe will cover a 23cm (9 inch) cake or 9 mini cakes.

LET ME SHOW YOU . . .



My Christmas Cakes Video