

Granny Daisy's Fruitcake

My Kind of Black Cake

For this Christmas season I made Granny Daisy's, I call her Mama, black cake. It's the spirit of her cake, not the actual recipe. I don't have my grandmother's recipe. I didn't see her use one. Though my memory tells me she used one pound each of butter and sugar, and a dozen eggs—a pound cake. I was only sometimes in the kitchen with her, occasionally rubbing sugar and butter, as she described it. Scolding me for turning the spoon—the batter, the wrong way. Still, I remember her method, though not the sequence of the addition of the ingredients, nor how many cups of flour. And I did not burn the brown sugar myself, instead I bought *browning*—a ready made burnt sugar liquid. I wonder how much dried fruits she used to flour, and how much I will need? I haven't made this cake in decades and my recipes have scant details on this matter.

For make my cake this time, I studied several recipes including two I own, but instead adapted one from a chef with Jamaican roots because her ingredients seemed closer to what I remember. Though I did not use my grandmother's plan, there is one important step I did not forget—the soaking of dried fruits weeks in advance. Miss Nicola, the chef, did not soak her fruits like my grandmother. And my fruits—raisins, currants, dates, prunes, and Amarena cherries have all been soaking for more than a month. But the best part of my adaptation is, there is no orange peel nor citron bits in my jar of fruits. *Sorry Mama, too many people just don't like the citron.* Adaptations aside, my cake was not quite my grandmother's either. Mama was devout and typically did not pour liquor atop her baked cakes. The alcohol does evaporate during baking leaving the cake moist from the soaked fruits, never drunken nor tacky. Though Mama would make one exception if she planned to send the cakes overseas, then she would give them a dousing of rum to keep them during the long transit to England or America.



My grandmother made cakes long before the invention of food processors and mixers for the home. When I did sit at her feet during cake making season, my main task was to hand chop raisins. She did not use dates in her cakes. I suspect they were not available in Jamaica, and prunes were a sometime thing depending on availability. Mama's fruitcake was not that tight amalgam of fruits and flour black from burnt sugar, as is common in the typical Jamaican black cake. Her cake was rich with flavors from the soaked fruits, with a texture containing detectable bits of the raisins and currants.

Mama described herself as a pastry cook, not a chef, as the pastry chef extraordinaire she really was. Over her lifetime, she was the pastry cook at several of the most prominent hotels on the North coast of Jamaica—a tourist haven. But she was most famous amongst us, her family. All of us descendants, grandchildren and aunts have vivid memories of her culinary skills. For me, it was her apple pie made with the Delicious varieties of the North-American apples, and a Black Forest chocolate cake. This is a cake based on the German desert, Black Forest Cherry-torte. A layered chocolate cake, filled with cherries and whipped cream. I remember Mama's decorated with chocolate frosting and whole maraschino cherries on the sides of the cake, but whipped cream and half cherry rounds on the top. My cousins' memories were of Mama's Christmas cake—the black cake, a traditional Jamaican speciality shipped to them in England.

The Black cake also is *the* legendary Jamaican wedding cake. A deliciously rich cake, exquisitely decorated for the occasion, with silver sugar beads and hand-formed decorations squirted from pastry bags of icings through metal spouts that formed decorative toppings of all sorts. One of the best treats for me was the almond paste that formed the underlining for the icing so the very moist black cake did not bleed through. On top of this typically would be a fondant icing made of pure confectionary sugar. Black cake was what wedding favors were made of—tiny white boxes inscribed with silver initials or the printed names of the couple, or even designs of two wedding bands or bells, filled with the tiniest portion of sweet cake.

APPROXIMATE GUIDE FOR MAKING A BIG BATCH OF SOAKED FRUITS

1 lb. currants ...3 lb. black raisins

¾ cup prunes... ¾ cup dates

½ cup maraschino cherries

1 cup regular rum...2 cups port wine

*Combine dates, prunes and raisins together
in about 1cup port wine & sit for 24-48 hours*

Pulse soaked fruits in food processor in small batches

Pulse several times but DO NOT PURÉE!

Fruit mixture will be thicker than pudding

...bits of fruit detectable—not pasty

Fold in currants w remaining fruits & place in large jar

Add remaining port and/or rum to fruit mixture

Note—there should be no liquid floating on top fruits

Add more chopped fruit if needed

Seal jar and let set for a while—weeks (4), months

All proportions are approximate



My only recollection of Christmas with extended family was the time my grandmother and I visited Aunt Jude—an apostolic healer minister who had her own church and lavish home on an expansive property in Red Hills Jamaica, overlooking a valley of shanty homes. I was always somewhat afraid of Aunt Jude—she was known to her religious community to be capable of driving out demons. Perhaps it was because she tried to *heal* the son of her niece, or was it her daughter’s son, whom I now understand must have been on the far end of the autism spectrum. But that Christmastime visit with her was wonderful—no unpleasantness from a boy violently hitting his head against a wall. It was a time in which my grandmother would give her black cake to friends and family for the season. Aunt Jude received hers and we sat as polite guests in her living room and I was permitted to sit with the adults in the living room on the company settee to have a morsel of fruitcake. Though I was partly a giver of the gift, it would have been impolite to decline the offer of cake even though as a child, it was not my favorite cake. But at Aunt Jude’s home my best manners were expected on display. The cake would have been accompanied by sorrel—the deep red hibiscus berry-based iced tea-like beverage, traditionally spiked with loads of ginger and liquor. Sorrel could be found in nearly every Jamaican household at Christmas time but I imagine there was no liquor served in my devout-no-liquor-drinking relative’s home. And I don’t remember having the sorrel because I found it unpleasant with the strong ginger taste.



My cake this Christmas is made with dried fruits soaked in Guyanese rum and Portuguese port wine. I included currants because I remember it in Mama’s concoction in those large jars. Not everyone includes them in the fruit mixture, perhaps because they are scarce in grocery stores. Before folding the fruits into my cake, I pulsed the presoaked raisins with prunes or plums and dates in my mini food processor. The addition of dates to my recipe is based on Chef Nicola’s, I like them for the added natural sweet. For the usual maraschino cherries, I substituted Amarena wild cherries from Italy, already preserved in a rich cane sugar syrup which I found at my neighborhood Costco. Oh my, these cherries are more than just for fruitcakes!

My friends and family don’t know there’s a fruitcake coming this season. I’m anxious what they will think because my baking skills have withered for lack of practice. I used to be a pretty good baker, a childhood friend reminds me. I am counting on my children to be my biggest cheerleaders—there’s a grandson who doesn’t like cakes, pies and the like but who is going to ask him to be a critic. My granddaughter, perhaps my most enthusiastic fan, is also finicky about baked goods when I send them to her in the mail. She thinks it all goes bad. As if I’d make my babygirl sick with

overdue baked goods. Still, she loves my baking—when she was three years old and I asked her what to bring her on my visit, she replied “bread” referring then to my fan-favorite cranberry bread.

My grandmother’s fruitcakes lasted for weeks, even months when she made them then. Years, if it was a wedding cake made with months-long soaked fruits and sealed with more liquor afterwards. Traditionally, the top tier of a wedding cake is reserved for the couple which they would save, unrefrigerated but periodically basted with sherry, and eaten on their first anniversary. But let's address fruitcake safety. Fruitcake does keep for weeks, says modern day Blogger, Posie Brien. The buttery, eggy batter is dense with dried fruit, candied fruit, nuts, and alcohol. According to her, dried and candied fruit have something called "low water activity" and because bacteria often requires moisture to reproduce, cakes packed with dried fruit are safe to keep for weeks. Made with alcohol, they will remain shelf-stable if tightly wrapped in plastic wrap.

I have no expectation that my cakes will hang around beyond the Christmas week. The friends receiving them early have all tasted their gift, some won't have any by Christmas morning. My cakes are not too sweet and baked in small batches in small or individual-sized tins. For the nervous ones, they are basted with a tablespoon or two or from on top immediately after baking. They should last a while.