

MONDAY, JUNE 24, 1996

TASTE BUDS



CHEF LARRY JONES

Cooking pros share tips for great cakes

I took a little heat a few weeks ago when I wrote a column about making your own wedding cake. Over two dozen readers called. Many said they would never attempt a wedding cake because they never really mastered baking a cake from scratch.

Momma is known for her German Chocolate Cake, and to this day, I request it every Aug. 26 when my birthday rolls around. Aunt Ange was known for her Sour Cream Coffee Cake, and even though she has never come out and admitted it, I know there's a hint of bourbon in it. The James Gang is wild about his cheesecakes. I'll never forget Chef Stee and his wonderful basic Genoise, which sat on your tongue like an angel's gossamer wings, and slowly dissipated. But does anyone bake a cake from scratch anymore? It's not as hard as it sounds, especially with some tips from pros.

Nick Malgieri, noted cooking teacher and author of "How To Bake," (copyright, 1995, Harper Collins Publishers, \$35) claims that one of the easiest cakes to master is a classic Genoise, otherwise known as an all-purpose sponge cake. Malgieri likes this cake because "it can be used as a layer cake, as a rolled cake, a plain cake with a simple frosting and in conjunction with a cheesecake instead of a pastry dough base."

Tips for success

In his book, Malgieri explains it is critical that the oven be accurate. Also, when baking, the racks should be set in the middle of the oven. As a secret hint to success, he also suggests that all the ingredients be at room temperature for ease of mixing.

Cold ingredients may cause the batter to separate while mixing and this will cause the cake to have a rough, irregular texture instead of a smooth, tender one.

Where Malgieri's book deals with baking as a whole, including the preparation of pies, tortes, breads, pizzas and muffins, when I find myself stumped, I always turn to Rose Levy Beranbaum and "The Cake Bible," (copyright 1988, Morrow Books, \$40). This grand encyclopedic collection of cakes and everything related to them. If you bake cakes, this book not only shows you how but can also detail the preparation of butter, creams, meringues, spun sugar, chocolate ribbons and enough piped flowers to fill a florist shop. Beranbaum claims that "perfect cakes can be achieved by anyone willing to follow good recipe directions. Cake making is an exact process; the ingredients and their relation to each other are balanced like a chemical formula."

In addition, Beranbaum agrees with Malgieri about having all the ingredients premeasured and at room temperature but offers a few additional pointers. She likes to use only cake flour which does not contain any leavening (don't use self-rising flour). She also recommends the use of superfine sugar for the best texture, unsalted butter for the best taste, fresh baking powder for the best rise and finally, the use of Magic Cake Strips for even layers and maximum height. Magic Cake Strips are ribbons of aluminum foil with Velcro type fasteners that can be soaked in water and wrapped around the sides of the cake pans during baking. These special strips allow down the baking of the sides while promoting rapid and even penetration at the bottom of the pan. They sell for under \$10 at most cake decorating shops.

Low-fat options

My final source for knowing how to bake the best cakes comes from Susan G. Purdy, author of "Have Your Cake and Eat It Too," (copyright 1993, Morrow Books, \$29). This book contains more than 200 luscious, low-fat cakes, pies, cookies and other desserts you thought you'd never be able to eat again.

Knowing that it's the fat in the cake that not only makes it look good but taste as good, Purdy has examined and suggested many alternatives for reducing the fat in your favorite cake recipes. Purdy writes "when you cut back or cut out the fat, you need to adjust a whole range of elements in a carefully balanced formula." You can remove one quarter to one third of the fat in a recipe, claims Purdy. The resulting texture is only "slightly denser," especially with the use of purees, eggs or egg whites, citrus zest and occasionally, sugar. But one thing for sure, everyone agrees on the importance of accurately weighing and measuring all the ingredients.

Chef Larry Jones is a free-lance writer. He welcomes your calls and comments. To leave a message for him, dial (313) 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, mailbox 1880. See recipes inside.

LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

■ Focus on Wine.



QUEEN'S OATS

Elegant cake: Moist and tender Lemon Poppy Seed Oat Cake uses basic ingredients and is simple to mix and bake. By adding a lemon glaze and fresh flowers, it becomes elegant enough for the fanciest occasion.

PERFECT CAKES

Ingredients

■ Margarine, butter and vegetable shortening are used most often for cakes other than angel food, chiffon and sponge cake. The fat affects both flavor and texture. A cake made with shortening generally has a softer crumb and finer texture. A cake made with butter has a richer flavor. Both butter and margarine need to stand at room temperature until they soften enough to blend easily with other ingredients. Shortening is ready to use unless it has been stored in the refrigerator.

■ Sugar sweetens and contributes to a cake's tenderness. Granulated or brown sugar is most often used in cakes. Powdered or confectioners' sugar usually is used in frostings and glazes. Granulated, brown and powdered sugars are not interchangeable.

■ Eggs contribute to a cake's structure and add color and richness. Use large eggs unless the recipe specifies otherwise.

■ Most recipes today call for all-purpose flour. All-purpose flour can be either bleached or unbleached. While they can be used interchangeably, bleached flour provides a cake with a finer texture. Because all-purpose flour is pre-sifted, it does not need to be sifted before measuring. Some cake recipes call for cake flour, cake flour is a finely milled soft wheat flour which produces a finer textured cake. Cake flour is not pre-sifted and should be sifted before measuring. To measure flour, spoon lightly into a dry measuring cup and level top with a metal spatula or the straight edge of a knife.

■ Oats. Unless a recipe specifies otherwise, either quick or old-fashioned oats may be used. The old-fashioned oats result in a cake with denser texture.

■ Leavening. Most cake recipes call for baking powder, baking soda or a combination of the two. These ingredients along with the air incorporated into a cake batter during mixing

are responsible for a cake's volume (height) and density.

Preparing Pans

■ Shiny metal cake pans will result in cakes with the highest volume and most even browning. Be sure to use the pan size specified in the recipe.

■ For most single and double layer cake, the cake pans are greased with vegetable shortening and lightly coated with a thin layer of flour. Cakes which will be cut and served from the pan may instead be sprayed with vegetable oil cooking spray. The pan does not need to be floured.

Filling Pans and Baking

■ Preheat oven at least 15 minutes before baking.

■ Pour or spoon batter into greased and floured cake pan(s) using the back of the spoon or rubber spatula push batter evenly into corners and against sides of pan. Cut through batter with knife to remove large air bubbles.

■ Begin testing for doneness after the minimum baking time specified in the recipe. Insert a wooden pick in the center of the cake. If it comes out clean with just a few moist crumbs clinging to it, the cake is done.

Cooling

■ Except for cakes which will be cut and served from the pan, cakes are removed from the pan to cool completely.

■ Allow cake to sit in pan on cooling rack for the length of time specified in the recipe, usually 10 minutes. Carefully run a thin bladed metal spatula between the cake and sides of the pan to loosen. Place another cooling rack on top and invert pan; cake should drop to cooling rack. Turn right by placing another cooling rack on top of cake layer and inverting. Cool completely before frosting.

Starting from scratch
Piece of cakeBY KEELY WYONIK
STAFF WRITER

Birthdays, weddings and anniversaries — some of the most memorable days of our lives are celebrated with cake.

"Cake holds the distinction of comeback food of the year," said Gale Gand, owner of Chicago's acclaimed Brasserie T restaurant at the recent International Association of Culinary Professionals Conference. On an emotional level, Gand credits baby boomers' affinity for "comfort food" with cake's resurgence on the dessert menu.

"I think baby boomers remember the good things from childhood," Gand said. "Cake certainly qualifies as one of those things that made them happy as kids. Well, now that the baby boomers are grown up and loaded with mid-life responsibilities, there's a desire to latch onto childhood pleasures."

A cake you make "from scratch" is not much more difficult than one that uses a mix, and offers endless possibilities for dressing up when the occasion calls for it.

A three-step mixing process results in a cake that is tender and flavorful, and has a good volume (height).

■ **Step one:** Beating the butter, margarine or vegetable shortening with the sugar and any flavorings until light and creamy incorporates air into the batter which contributes to a cake's volume.

■ **Step two:** Beating in the eggs, one at a time, incorporates additional air into the batter.

■ **Step three:** Adding the combined dry ingredients alternately with the milk (or other liquid) is the fastest way to complete the mixing process without overmixing. Overmixing can toughen a cake.

Depending on the occasion, a basic cake can be served plain or embellished in many different ways. One-layer cakes that will be served from the pan might be frosted, glazed, covered with a broiled topping or sprinkled with powdered sugar.

Serve the cake plain with a scoop of ice cream or a spoonful of whipped cream and fresh fruit.

Cakes that are baked in a tube pan or fluted tube pan frequently are drizzled with a glaze. A lemony glaze, fresh mint leaves and lemon slices are all the dressing up Lemon Poppy Seed Oat Cake, pictured above, needs. When used in baking, oats add texture and improve the keeping quality because they attract moisture. As an alternative to the lemon glaze, powdered sugar can be lightly sifted over the top of the cake just before serving.

Cake recipes are often passed down generation-to-generation, or shared between friends. Barbara Couillard of Westland, and Mary Serva of Bloomfield Hills, entered their favorite recipes in Michigan's Best Cake Contest sponsored by Zehnder's of Frankenmuth and "Michigan Living" magazine. Both were among the 18 finalists.

Couillard said her entry — Grandma's Yellow Angel Food Cake — is more like a sponge cake than an angel food cake.

"It was my grandmother's recipe," she said. "I remember her making it. Mine is good, but it still doesn't taste as good as hers." Couillard said the egg whites used in the recipe should be room temperature. "It adds more volume she said."

Serva's contest entry is appropriately named — "Can I Have That Recipe?" Chocolate Cake. It's a recipe everyone asks for. "One thing that makes this cake different is the frosting. It's a lot like fudge," she said. "This cake is really good for people who really love chocolate."

Although she doesn't have a lot of time to bake, Serva said she has always enjoyed it. "I was one of those kids who had an Easy Bake Oven," she said. "The chocolate cake recipe was my girlfriend's. We made it when we were kids and everyone loved it. I changed the frosting recipe so it's not so sugary. I made it richer by using sweet (condensed) milk."

• See recipes inside

Ruby Red Strawberries
Michigan's JewelsBY CHRISTINE VENEMA
STAFF WRITER

Michigan strawberries are in season, and if you don't feel like picking them yourself, baskets of these red jewels are available at grocery stores and markets.

Legend has it that the ancestors of the strawberry came from both North and South America. However, it took several centuries and a side trip to Europe to produce the strawberry we know today.

In the early 18th century, French explorers discovered a plump, red berry being cultivated by the Indians of Chile. Several plants were brought back to the homeland where in 1714 the Chiloan berry was crossed with a wild meadow strawberry discovered a few years earlier in the North American colony of Virginia. The resulting cross is the ancestor to today's strawberry.

Selecting & Storing

Shop for fully ripened, bright red strawberries as they do not ripen after picking. Choose berries that are plump and well rounded with a natural shine, rich red color and bright green, fresh looking caps.

Strawberries are best used as soon after purchasing or picking as possible to insure the most delectable flavor, appearance and highest nutritional value. Never wash strawberries or remove caps until just before using. Washing removes the natural protective outer layers. The caps protect the strawberries and help preserve flavor, texture, and nutrients.

Handling tips

Since strawberries are delicate, they

See STRAWBERRIES, 18



KIDS' CORNER PHOTO

Berry good: Now is a great time to start jammin'! Michigan strawberry season is about to begin. Nothing tastes better on muffins than homemade jam.