

Fruitcake Mission: Three Decades of Giving

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Seize the moment. Remember all those women on the Titanic who waved off the dessert cart. ~Erma Bombeck

I perch on a wooden stool with a note pad in front of me. The smell of cinnamon, nutmeg, and baking bread fills my kitchen, enveloping me like a velvet cloak. Outside the picture window trees sway in the wind, crimson and gold maple leaves flutter to the ground. Like the damp earth, my counter is also splattered with color: brown sugar, tawny spices, red cranberries, green pistachios. It's fruitcake baking season! A torn page from a magazine, yellowed with age, leans cockeyed against the window and my handwritten alterations to the ingredients crawls through butter stains. It doesn't matter though—I know the recipe by heart.

"You busy with the cakes?" my friend Margaret asks me, weeks before the holidays. "I'm counting on you for dessert."

"Just checking that you have one for me," a neighbor inquires, while walking her dog. "Your cakes are part of my Christmas dinner. Wouldn't be the same without it."

"My mom's sure looking forward to the holidays with your cake," my architect says, years after the house was built. I've never met his mother. The first year I gave him a cake, he called that very evening to say it was the best fruitcake his mother had ever tasted. She's received one every year since.

For almost three decades I've made and given fruitcakes as holiday gifts, a festive acknowledgment of fellowship and thanks to my family and friends. I started making them in college, at a time when I couldn't afford to buy gifts. I chose fruitcakes because they symbolized a Dickens Christmas—visions of plump cooks baking while snow gently dusts the village's thatched roofs.

The grocery store in my Midwestern hometown sold flavorless fruitcakes filled with day-glow globs masquer-

ading as fruit. Producing a drop-dead delicious fruitcake challenged my creativity. I never thought that I was starting a tradition.

Now I make them because my friends and family expect them, and because I get a kick out of contravening people's expectations that all fruitcakes taste like those my grocery store sold when I was growing up—a cloyingly sweet, dry mass that stuck to the roof of the mouth. Thirty years past my college apartment stove, I've turned into a missionary on behalf of the fruitcake.

I bake two dozen or so, depending on the names jotted on my note pad. My family always appears—my brother, his wife, my parents, my cousin, my in-laws. Each year, I give fruitcakes to friends who have played a significant role in my life: the fourth-grade teacher who put my oldest daughter at ease in a new classroom, the contractor who built my dream house, the midwife who helped with the birth of my second daughter, the neighbor who pampered my pets while I traveled. I give them to friends who have listened to my tales of woe and who have celebrated in my successes, to college buddies I haven't seen in twenty-five years, to "never-marrieds" who are alone on the holidays, to an old friend who sat with me after my first husband died. A few cakes are held back, like a vintner's reserve, and remain in my freezer for future tasting. I have never sent one to the White House. Nor do I plan to, regardless of who lives there.

The fruitcakes from my childhood were wrapped in candy-apple red cellophane that crinkled loudly when touched, like a swarm of angry bees. I package my fruitcakes in a burgundy box with my initials embossed on the lower right hand side and tie it with a gold bow—simple, elegant, and silent.

"It's a fruit cake," I say when handing them out.

If my friends have received one previously, or are already fruitcake lovers, they usually respond with "Oohs" and "Ahs," as they embrace the box with mittened hands. Sometimes, their eyes roll heavenward, reliving some divine taste of a Christmas past.

Reactions from recipients who have only experienced "grocery store" fruitcakes are expressive: eyebrows rise,

mouths twist into a grimace, and tentative hands hold the gift as far from the body as possible. Their eyes search for the nearest trashcan, ready to ditch the hellacious gift once I leave the vicinity.

"Let me know if you like it," I say. "I'm always looking for ways to improve the recipe."

They nod, and are then obliged to try a bite, maybe a slice.

"I loved your cake," some report later. "I never knew fruitcake tasted good. I always thought they were made from fake stuff—you know, those green and red whatevers." Or, "I brought it to a last minute pot-luck and was surprised how many people asked me for the recipe." Bingo! Converts.

One friend missed the fluorescent, candied fruit globs. She was a pastry chef at a fancy restaurant, and her grandfather's family had owned White Swan Candied Fruit Company, the purveyors of day-glow fruit. "It was delicious, but if you want to call it a fruitcake," she said, "add maraschino cherries."

If my cake is snubbed, I'm apt to believe the recipient is not worthy of my friendship. Once, standing at the door of a boyfriend's house, I offered him a box. He cautiously stared at my gift, possibly worried it might contain a contagious disease called commitment. After some hesitation, he placed the container on a dusty credenza. By the time New Year's came, I'd forgotten his name. In another instance, I spotted my familiar box on the kitchen counter at a friend's holiday pot-luck dinner—unopened for a week. I suggested the hostess offer it to her guests. Refusing, she said, "Only fruitcakes like fruitcake." I can't say we've spoken much since, and the following year her name did not appear on my list.

Like so many fruitcake seasons past, I sit in my cozy kitchen watching the steam rise from a batch of golden brown loaves fresh from the oven. Outside, the maple leaves flutter and a squirrel dashes across the crimson-carpeted yard, its cheeks stuffed with winter provisions. I add a new name to my list, a recently acquired friend. I wonder what her reaction will be when I present her with the burgundy box—a smile or a grimace? Either way, I'll keep spreading the news.

Lisa's Fruit Cake

2/3 cup firmly packed dark brown sugar
1/2 cup (1/4 lb) butter at room temperature
3 large eggs
1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon ground mace
1/8 teaspoon ground cloves

Fruits and nut mixture:

1 cup currants
1/2 cup golden raisins
1/2 cup dried blueberries
1/2 cup dried cranberries
1/2 cup dried Bing cherries
1/2 cup unsalted pistachio pieces
1/2 cup pecan pieces

About 1/2 cups good quality Port wine

In a large bowl, beat sugar and butter with a mixer until well blended, beat in eggs, 1 at a time. Stir together flour, baking powder, cinnamon, mace, and cloves. Add to egg mixture; stir, beat to blend. Stir in fruit and nut mix.

Spoon batter equally into 6 greased 2 1/2 -by 4-inch individual loaf pan OR 1 regular-sized loaf pan. Spread batter evenly and smooth top.

Bake at 300° oven until a toothpick inserted in center comes out clean and cakes are firm when lightly pressed in center, 45 to 60 minutes for small pans, longer for regular sized loaf pan (1 1/2 hours). Cool in pans on a rack for 10 minutes, invert onto rack to cool completely.

Set the cakes in a single layer in a 9- by 13-inch baking dish or pan, or set each cake on a rectangle of foil large enough to seal the cake airtight. Spoon 2 tablespoons of Port onto each cake slowly enough to let it seep in. Repeat until the cake is saturated. Wrap each cake airtight in foil.

Store at room temperature at least 8 hours or up to 2 weeks; freeze and store up to 2 months. Makes six mini loaves – or one regular-sized loaf.