

Twice sherried Christmas cake



Perhaps this should be 'California Christmas cake', due to the inclusion of apricots, dates and macadamias. You don't have to use them – you can substitute pretty much any dried fruit and nuts you like. These ones worked for me, but maybe because I ate it in a log cabin near Lake Tahoe after inching my way down the freezing ski slopes. The use of two whole bottles of sherry, however, seems very British, and should work anywhere.

Makes: 1 very substantial cake

Preparation time: 1-2 hours depending on tin-lining skills and kitchen equipment available

Cooking time: 3-4 hours

225g (8oz) currants

225g (8oz) dried sweet cherries, halved

115g (4oz) glacé cherries, halved

115g (4oz) raisins

115g (4oz) dried apricots, chopped

115g (4oz) dates, chopped

85g (3oz) candied orange peel, chopped (preferably home-made, see other recipe)

85g (3oz) candied lemon peel, chopped (preferably home-made, see other recipe)

1 bottle (750ml) Oloroso sherry (you'll end up needing another bottle later – see below)

melted butter for lining cake tin

225g (8oz) unsalted butter, at room temperature

225g (8oz) muscovado sugar

4 large eggs, lightly beaten

285g (10oz) plain flour, sifted if it looks clumpy

1½ tsps mixed ground spices – cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice, ginger and clove

45g (1½oz) unsalted macadamia nuts, ground (or you could use blanched almonds)

45g (1½oz) walnuts, ground (or you could use skinned hazelnuts)

½ tsp regular table salt (or just a wee pinch if you could only get salted macadamias and/or salted butter)

grated zest of 1 large orange

grated zest of 1 large lemon

2 tbsps molasses or dark treacle

½ tsp vanilla extract

another bottle of Oloroso sherry

selection of whole nuts – almonds, walnuts, macadamias, brazil nuts etc

some apricot jam

1. The day before you want to bake, put all dried fruit, including candied peel, into a bowl and mix with the first bottle of sherry. Cover with a tea towel and leave for 12-24 hours, stirring occasionally.
2. Heat oven to 175C (350F), with a rack in the middle position. Line a 9" cake tin with *two* layers of parchment paper – on the bottom and around the side. Brush each side of each piece of parchment with melted butter. Then wrap *two* sheets of parchment around the outside of the tin, extending 2" above the top, and tie it in place with string. Don't be tempted to skip these steps – they're essential for protecting the cake!
3. Cream butter and sugar together with a wooden spoon or in an electric mixer until it's really smooth, pale and fluffy. Next beat in eggs, adding them in at least 6 additions, and beating until well blended in between each addition. As this progresses you may find it hard to bring the mix together into an emulsified mass. Don't worry – just beat harder and faster!
4. Fold in dry flour, spices, nuts and salt. If it didn't look emulsified before, it should now. Then fold in macerated fruits, zests, molasses and vanilla.
5. Carefully pour mixture into the prepared cake tin, smooth and level out the surface with the back of a big metal spoon, then create a slight hollow in the centre (as otherwise the centre will rise up too far and look silly).
6. Bake in the middle of the oven for one hour at 175C (350F) and then 2 hours at 135C (275F). Check if it's ready by inserting a wooden skewer into the middle – it should come out clean. It will probably need up to another hour in the oven. Don't be tempted to increase the temperature.
7. Let cool in the tin on a rack for half an hour or so, then turn out and cool completely on the rack. Wrap up well in 2 layers of parchment paper and a layer of foil and store somewhere cool.
8. Every couple of days, unwrap the cake, stab it all over with a skewer, drizzle over a few tbsps of sherry and then wrap it up well again. Keep up this feeding regime until Christmas. You should be able to get through the majority of the second bottle of sherry if not all of it.
9. To decorate, lightly toast whole, skinless nuts in a moderately hot oven, brush top of cake with slightly diluted jam, arrange nuts on top in a pretty pattern, pressing them on firmly, and glaze top by brushing with a little more runny jam. You could wrap a fat ribbon round the edge too, if you're so inclined.

