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Please Don't Call It Pound Cake

JUST ABOUT EVERY AMERICAN dessert cookbook has at least one recipe for something called “pound cake,” a term we don’t really think about but which has a history reaching back several centuries. Where did these cakes get that rather puzzling name? The answer is very simple: some of the first pound cake recipes in nineteenth-century American cookbooks were made using a pound each of flour, sugar, eggs, and butter and some flavoring, which ranged from the plain to spicy. Rose water or brandy or both were sometimes added to the batter, and mace became the favored spice in southern pound cakes. Virtually no recipes in the old days used chemical agents to raise their cakes, relying instead on vigorous beating of the batter and the leavening power of eggs.

What I love about a basic pound cake is its texture—firm yet moist, and with a fine crumb—easily achieved by proper mixing of the classic ratios of butter, eggs, sugar, and flour. Many recipes, both old and new, include slightly more sugar, which contributes to the cakes’ moistness and tenderness.

Pound cakes are English in origin, and many countries have adopted the cake, including the French, who call their version *quatre quarts* (meaning four fourths), as it contains equal weights of flour, butter, sugar, and eggs.

Pound cakes became popular in America early in our history, and women were baking them in their home brick ovens well before the Revolutionary War. By 1796, when Amelia Simmons published *American Cookery*,¹ she completely left out the method for mixing and baking her recipe with the classic proportions, which implies that pound cake in those times was so commonly made that no instructions were necessary. Miss Simmons flavored her cake with “rose water one gill [$\frac{1}{2}$ cup], spices to your taste.”

By the time Eliza Leslie wrote the 1851 edition of *Directions for Cookery*,² cookbook authors were already playing around with what can be called a pound cake. Miss Leslie starts out classically, by beating a pound each of butter and sugar to a cream. Then, “when they are perfectly light,” she gradually beats in her flavorings—1 tablespoon of cinnamon, 1 teaspoon mace, and two whole grated nutmegs.

Pure vanilla extract, although available in the mid-nineteenth century, was expensive and not commonly used in cakes. It served, instead, as a perfume long before it became a beloved ingredient in cookery. Miss Leslie beats 10 eggs “as light as possible,” and stirs them in alternately with a pound of sifted flour, then follows by adding the juice of two lemons or three large oranges. That juice will certainly change the flavor and texture of the cake!

I think the essential step in Miss Leslie’s procedure is beating “the butter and sugar to a cream.” Today we know that it is the creation of multitudes of tiny air cells during the creaming process and their expansion in the heat of the

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oven that causes cakes to rise.³ Eggs beaten into the batter also aid in the enlargement of the air cells during baking. Eggs add moisture in the form of fat and water and contribute to the cake’s tenderness.

In 1853, Mrs. Bliss⁴ changed the recipe in the opposite direction, making a heavier cake by using only 8 eggs and increasing the flour to $1\frac{1}{4}$ pounds. While this cake would be dryer, Mrs. Bliss’s method of beating the whites and yolks separately would have increased the leavening power of the eggs. Miss Parloa, in her 1872 edition of *The*



Appledore Cook Book,⁵ says “Always beat the eggs separately for pound cake, and stir in the whites the last thing.” Bear in mind that these pioneering bakers had no electric mixers (or electricity!) to ease their cake making, but they knew the leavening power of beaten eggs.

At this point we might ask, “When did the addition of chemical leaveners to pound cake batters begin?” After all, these leaveners can help cakes rise so that the cook needn’t fuss with separating eggs, beating them separately, and carefully folding in the whites. The short answer is around the mid-nineteenth century. But the bakers who did so were definitely in the minority. Mrs. Cornelius, in *The Young Housekeeper’s Friend*,⁶ notes somewhat disdainfully that “Some persons...add a quarter of a teaspoonful of saleratus (a form of baking soda)” to pound cake. However, Mrs. Porter, in *Mrs. Porter’s New Southern Cookery Book* (1871),⁷ unapologetically includes “half a teaspoonful of soda and one teaspoonful cream of tartar” in her pound cake formulas. By Mrs. Porter’s time, baking powder had been on the scene for about fifteen years, and manufacturers such as Royal were heavily promoting their ability to produce light cakes with far less beating.⁸

Why were pound cakes so popular? Two reasons stand out: because of their size, the cakes could feed many people; and they kept well for several days at room temperature. It’s

important to remember that pound cakes rose in popularity during less complicated times in our history. They predate layer cakes by at least a century, and although cookies (called “little cakes”) did have a place in home baking in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the lack of an oven thermostat meant that they didn’t always turn out properly.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, most families were large, and many lived on farms. Cows and chickens provided the butter and eggs, and a large cake that kept well was something highly esteemed because it would stay fresh several days without refrigeration and could be served to company. Because of pound cake’s firm texture, slices could easily be topped with fruit without disintegrating. Pound cakes (and other large egg- and butter-rich cakes, some containing dried fruits) became a symbol of the home: basic cakes, essentially unadorned, that satisfied a common sweet tooth. They were comfort food at its most fundamental, often standing on the sideboard, available for a quick nibble.

It is inevitable, however, that recipes change over time. Nevertheless, I object to the sort of change that takes away that special, fine, compact, moist crumb that has been the hallmark of this grand cake for centuries. A case in point is Nicole Rees’s Blueberry-Lime Pound Cake in *Fine Cooking* magazine.⁹ Here is a perfectly delicious and beautiful cake,

a butter cake containing blueberries and drizzled with a lime-flavored confectioners' sugar icing. But the ingredients and proportions don't come close to making it a pound cake. I believe she calls it one because it is large and baked in a tube pan and it is not an angel food cake or a sponge cake. Calling it pound cake gives it a homey, comforting ring. But it is not accurate.

James Villas, writing in the March 2008 issue of *Saveur*, identifies himself as a pound cake fanatic, yet he eschews the classic formula for one containing baking powder, far more sugar, fewer eggs, and milk.¹⁰ He also claims cake flour won't work (though it does) in place of all-purpose flour because it lacks the strength to support the heavy batter. Nicole Rees writes that pound cake made with a pound each of flour, eggs, sugar, and butter is a simple ratio, "but a tender cake it does not make."¹¹ I disagree. She goes on to say that "most traditional pound cake recipes...yield a cake that's both too sturdy and too dry for modern tastes." Too sturdy for what? And whose modern tastes?

In his recent book *Ratio* Michael Ruhlman favors the classic pound cake proportions of one part *each* of butter, sugar, egg, and flour, which, he notes, "results in a buttery, eggy cake that is delicious as is."¹² He uses no chemical leaveners in his formula.

Shirley Corriher, in *Bakewise*, has devoted a whole chapter to pound cakes. They're delicious and moist, with moistness being the sine qua non for Shirley. As a food chemist, she has developed numerous pound cake formulas that satisfy her personal taste. You'll find flour, sugar, butter, and eggs in her cakes along with three other fats for a silky-smooth texture: vegetable shortening and canola oil, beaten into the batter, and whipped cream folded in at the end. To lighten her cakes a bit more, she includes a little baking powder. In some recipes she substitutes potato starch for 10 percent of the flour—a technique she learned from Bruce Healy¹³—which also lightens the texture.

I have made the cakes I've just described, and they are wonderful. But are they pound cakes in the true, classic sense? I say no. I believe that the pound cake formula—and, therefore, its special texture—has been altered so extensively by so many bakers over time, that it's not correct to call these newer cakes pound cakes at all. I propose we call them "tube cakes" or "butter cakes" instead. Not especially sexy, but honest.

A classic pound cake will stay fresh for days at room temperature, while these lighter, fluffier cakes made with chemical leaveners become stale quite quickly. I see no reason to use a chemical leavener, unless you add something that changes the acid/base relationship of a pound

cake batter, such as buttermilk or sour cream. When correctly made, pound cake's texture is firm but not in the least bit dry or heavy. To achieve this fine texture, the butter should be malleable but not soft. Its temperature should be between 65 and 70°F, which can easily be determined with an instant-read digital probe thermometer.

So what recipe would I choose to make to create a delicious, rich-tasting, satisfyingly moist, yet dense and long-lasting pound cake? Try this one. I've given detailed instructions for every step of the process. I hope you'll be as delighted with it as I am. ☺

Classic Pound Cake

This recipe fits the traditional formula for pound cake:

1 pound each of butter, flour, eggs, and sugar, flavored with mace, vanilla, and brandy. And it makes a big cake. But if you weigh the sugar you'll discover that it comes to about 19 ounces of sugar instead of the expected 16. Why? Sugar tenderizes and holds onto moisture, giving the cake a firm and moist texture. Some recipes, like James Villas's, go so far as to use 21 ounces of sugar to 12 ounces each of butter and flour.

Note that the recipe calls for 1 pound of cake flour. If you have a scale, weigh the flour. If not, follow the measuring instructions.

You will need a heavy-duty stand mixer with a flat beater (paddle attachment) and a two-piece 10×4-inch tube pan. I use one made of lightweight aluminum. If you use a heavier pan, the baking time will be a few minutes longer. A standard-size Bundt pan is too small.

INGREDIENTS

1 pound (4 cups) cake flour
1 pound (4 sticks) cold unsalted butter
10 large eggs, refrigerator temperature
2¾ cups granulated sugar
1 teaspoon table salt
½ teaspoon ground mace
1 tablespoon pure vanilla extract
2 tablespoons brandy

Position an oven rack one-third up from the bottom of the oven, and preheat the oven to 350°F. Butter the tube pan, line the bottom with wax paper, butter the paper, and dust the pan lightly with fine, dry, unseasoned breadcrumbs, tapping out excess crumbs. Or, simply coat the pan generously with nonstick spray containing flour.

If measuring the flour, spoon unsifted cake flour into a dry 1-cup measure to overflowing and level with a metal spatula without shaking the cup or packing down the flour; transfer the flour to a sifter set on a sheet of wax paper and repeat the measuring and transferring to the sifter three more times; sift the flour three times to aerate.

Ideally, the butter should be between 65 and 70°F, malleable but not soft. Because kitchen temperatures vary, take your butter straight from the refrigerator and slice each stick evenly into eight pieces. Put the butter into the mixer bowl, and in about 10 minutes it will be ready to be beaten until fluffy and creamy. Once the butter has reached this point, it is ready to receive the sugar and be beaten for several minutes longer, the crucial step in creating the air cells that will expand during baking. If the butter is too firm, air cells won't develop as they should. If the butter is too soft, it won't have the structure to support the air cells.

While the butter loses its chill, the eggs should be warmed before adding to the batter, or the batter may "seize." Put the cold eggs into a bowl, cover them with 2 inches of hot tap water, and let them stand 5 minutes or so. Crack them into a large measuring cup with pouring spout and beat with a fork to combine them well.

Measure out the remaining ingredients, and you're ready to begin. Beat the butter with the flat beater on medium speed until creamy and fluffy, 1 to 2 minutes. Stop occasionally to scrape the butter from the beater and sides of the bowl. The butter must have a creamy look. When you remove the beater from the bowl and hold it up, the butter should have small peaks all over.

Add $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar, the salt, mace, and vanilla, and beat 1 minute on medium speed. Scrape the bowl and beater with a rubber spatula. While beating on medium speed, gradually add the remaining 2 cups sugar, taking about 1 minute to do so. Scrape the bowl and beater once more and beat continuously on medium-high speed for 6 minutes. Scrape the bowl and beater once more.

Set the mixer to medium speed and gradually add the beaten eggs in a slow, steady stream, over the course of 1 minute. Then beat 1 minute more on medium speed. The reason for this process is that pound-cake batter is an emulsion, like a mayonnaise—a mixture of fats and water, the water being contained in the egg whites. The yolks are the emulsifiers that facilitate the smooth union of the butterfat and the egg whites. Emulsions are best made by the slow addition of emulsifier. This is why the eggs are beaten into the aerated butter and sugar in a slow, steady stream. It is also possible to beat warmed eggs one at a time into the batter, but this sometimes results in a "curdled" batter, which means the emulsion has broken down.

On low speed, gradually add the flour, mixing only until incorporated and the batter is smooth. Your aim is to maintain as much of the aeration in the batter as possible, so think gentle. Scrape the bowl and beater. Add the brandy and stir it into the batter (which will be thick) with the rubber spatula. Brandy and other alcohols, besides adding flavor, help tenderize the cake's structure.

Scrape the batter into the prepared pan and spread it level. Cover the top of the pan with a piece of aluminum foil (shiny side up) large enough to fold down around the top 2 inches or so of the pan. But keep the foil loose; don't press it tightly to the pan. Put the pan in the oven.

After 30 minutes, open the oven door, reach in, and quickly remove the foil. Close the oven door and continue baking about 70 minutes more. Total baking time is 1 hour and 40 minutes. The cake will be golden brown, domed on top, and will have a crack or two. Test for doneness by plunging a thin wooden skewer into the thickest part of the cake. The tester should look dry when you pull it out.

Cool the cake in its pan on a wire rack for 30 minutes. Cover with another rack and invert. Remove the pan and paper (if used), cover with a rack, and carefully invert to cool completely, for several hours, right side up.

Pound cake is best if allowed to stand overnight. When completely cool, wrap airtight in plastic wrap and leave at room temperature. Serve pound cake cut into thin slices, two to a portion. If wrapped properly, pound cake will keep well at room temperature for several days. You can also freeze the cake. Wrap cooled cake well in plastic wrap, then in foil, and freeze for up to 4 months. Thaw completely—overnight is best—before unwrapping.

NOTES

1. Amelia Simmons, *American Cookery* (Bedford, MA.: Applewood Books, 1996 [facsimile of 2d ed.]), 48.
2. Eliza Leslie, *Directions for Cookery: An Unabridged Reprint of the 1851 Classic* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1999) 339–340.
3. Shirley O. Corriher, *BakeWise: The Hows and Whys of Successful Baking* (NY: Scribner, 2008).
4. Mrs. Bliss, *The Practical Cook Book* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1853), 208.
5. Maria Parloa, *The Appledore Cook Book* (Boston: Graves and Ellis, 1872), 177.
6. Mrs. Cornelius, *The Young Housekeeper's Friend* (Boston: Brown, Taggard, and Chase, 1859), 54.
7. Mrs. M.E. Porter, *Mrs. Porter's New Southern Cookery Book* (Philadelphia: John E. Potter and Company, 1871), 246.
8. *The Royal Baker* (New York: Royal Baking Powder, 1877).
9. Nicole Rees, Blueberry-Lime Pound Cake, in "Blueberries Star in Summer Desserts," *Fine Cooking* 93 (July 2008): 73.
10. James Villas, "The Great Cake," *Saveur* 109 (March, 2008): 39–40.
11. Nicole Rees, "Pound Cake, Perfected," *Fine Cooking* 83 (January 2007): 66–69.
12. Michael Ruhlman, *Ratio: The Simple Codes Behind the Craft of Everyday Cooking* (New York: Scribner, 2009), 61.
13. Bruce Healy and Paul Bugat, *The Art of the Cake* (New York: William Morrow, 1999), 522–523.