

Perfecting Spice Cake

Spice cakes can be bland and leaden. Could we create a tender, airy cake with convincing spice flavor that stands up to a rich cream cheese frosting?

BY KEITH DRESSER

The spice cake I remember most vividly is from my childhood. Though my grandmother baked it in a rectangular pan, this cake was light and airy and more akin to a layer cake than the heavy, dense snack cakes that all too often define the genre today. While it wasn't the fanciest dessert my grandmother served, it was company cake, something too special to serve every day. It was moist and substantial, with spices that were warm and bold without being overpowering, and its layer of rich cream cheese frosting was the perfect complement. I wanted to return to this classic, but the recipe for my grandmother's spice cake was never fixed in writing.

I decided to do a little research in our library, where I found as many variations on the spice cake theme as there are cooks to make them. I found Bundt cakes with raisins and nuts; squat, square versions that resembled gingerbread or carrot cake; cakes calling for everything from apples and stewed figs to chocolate chips and pumpkin puree. Some had spice overload, tasting gritty and dusty. Others were so lacking in spice flavor that it seemed as if a cinnamon stick had only been waved in their general direction. In fact, other than a mixture of warm spices, there were few common denominators linking any of these desserts. And, unfortunately, not one had the old-fashioned simplicity of the frosted spice cake from my childhood. I would have to begin from scratch.

Building Cake with the Right Heft

The texture of my grandmother's cake resembled the firm, moist, melt-in-your-mouth lightness of our Rich



Lightly spiced cream cheese frosting tops a moist, tender cake.

and Tender Yellow Cake (March/April 1999). But simply adding spices to this recipe didn't work. The cake crumbled under the heavy frosting, and the spice flavor was overwhelming. To add volume and heft, I replaced the cake flour used in that recipe with all-purpose flour. The switch made for a slightly tougher,

drier cake. Adding more yolks to the batter increased the cake's tenderness; so did switching from milk to buttermilk, which also enriched the cake's flavor. Doubling the dairy from ½ cup to 1 cup was enough to fix the dryness issue.

But the most important adjustment I made involved the mixing technique. We make our yellow cake by reversing the usual order of things and mixing butter into the dry ingredients before adding the liquids, which yields a cake with a very fine-grained texture. I wanted a more open and substantial crumb, so I used the standard method of beating the softened butter with the sugar, incorporating the eggs, and adding flour and liquid alternately in small amounts.

Putting Spice into Spice Cake

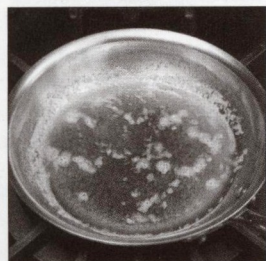
I knew that simply adding more spice to something does not lead to increased spiciness. Most of what we experience when we consume a food containing spice is not actually the spice's taste but its aroma. These aromas are produced by volatile oils found within the spice cells. When spices are ground, these aromatic oils are released,

which is why freshly ground whole spices are much "tastier" (i.e., more aromatic) than packaged ground spices (especially those that have been sitting on the shelf awhile). But in addition to being too much work, individually grinding the five spices I'd chosen for the recipe always imparted a faint but discernible grittiness

to the cake, no matter how much time they spent in the spice grinder.

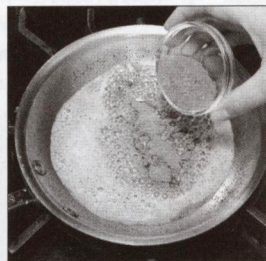
What about using techniques from the test kitchen to get the most out of the spices already in my cupboard? I knew from preparing curries and chilis that heating spices (either through dry-toasting them or blooming them in hot oil) intensifies their aroma. This is because heat drives moisture out of the spice, carrying the aromatic oils along with it. While both techniques created a fuller-flavored cake, dry-toasting the spices was not as successful as blooming them in oil. Toasting allows more of the piquant aromas to escape into the air, but because the aromatic oils are soluble in cooking

AT A GLANCE | KEYS TO SPICE FLAVOR



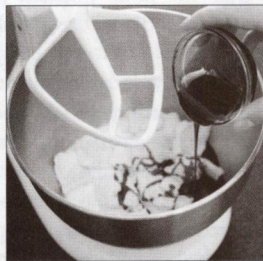
1. BROWNED BUTTER

Browning the butter imparts a faint nuttiness that deepens the cake's spice flavor.



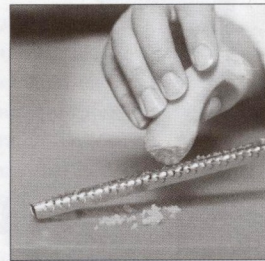
2. BLOOMED SPICES

Blooming the spices in the browned butter brings out their volatile oils, boosting their impact.



3. A HINT OF MOLASSES

Molasses adds a bittersweet note that underscores the warm flavor of the spices.

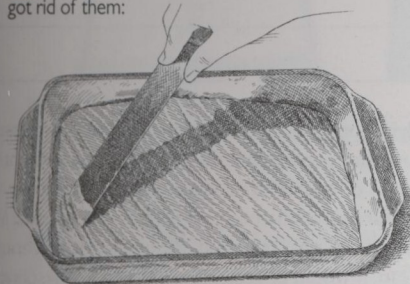


4. GRATED GINGER

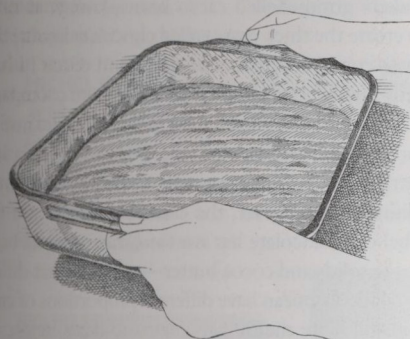
Finely grated ginger adds a fresh, zesty quality to the cake that dried ginger can't provide.

TECHNIQUE | REMOVING TRAPPED AIR BUBBLES

In cakes with a thick batter, such as spice cake or carrot cake, trapped air bubbles can lead to a finished cake with unsightly holes. Here's how we got rid of them:



1. Run the tip of a metal spatula through the batter in a zigzag motion, pulling it to the edges of the pan.



2. Gently tap the pan against the counter three or four times to release any air bubbles that have risen to the surface.

oil, blooming them was a more effective way of making sure they made it into the cake.

Up to this point, I had been using ground cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, allspice, and nutmeg. While the mixture contributed a respectable spiciness to the cake, I wanted more complexity. A coworker suggested steeping crushed fresh ginger in the buttermilk to extract maximum flavor. This brought slightly more depth of flavor to the cake but not enough to justify the extra work. A tablespoon of grated fresh ginger added directly to the batter, on the other hand, added noticeable zing. For yet another flavor dimension, I replaced the oil I had been using to bloom my spices with browned butter, which imparted a faint nuttiness and filled out the overall taste of the cake. As a finishing touch, I incorporated a couple tablespoons of molasses into the batter—just enough to balance the spices with a slight bittersweet nuance without turning the cake into gingerbread.

Topping It Off

All that remained was to create just the right frosting. Almost every frosting recipe for spice cake I'd come across in my initial research consisted of confectioners' sugar, cream cheese, and butter in varying amounts. To create a light, creamy frosting that would work

well with the cake's tender crumb, I used a little less butter than called for in most of these recipes. When I frosted the cake, however, I was disappointed. The two elements lacked harmony and needed something to pull them into balance. Why shouldn't that be spice? I added ½ teaspoon of the spice mixture from the cake to the frosting, which lent a subtle yet perceptible flavor that made the two work beautifully together.

Maybe this cake will be one that my daughter will remember from her childhood. But unlike me, she'll have a recipe that will let her know exactly what to do to get it right.

SPICE CAKE WITH CREAM CHEESE FROSTING

SERVES 12 TO 14

To save time, let the eggs, buttermilk, and butter come up to temperature while the browned butter and spice mixture cools. To prevent unsightly air holes in the finished cake, be sure to follow the instructions for removing air bubbles in the batter (see illustrations at left). Leftover cake can be stored, covered with plastic wrap, in the refrigerator for up to 2 days. The cake should be brought to room temperature before serving.

Cake

- 2¼ cups (11¼ ounces) unbleached all-purpose flour, plus extra for dusting pans
- 1 tablespoon ground cinnamon
- ¾ teaspoon ground cardamom
- ½ teaspoon ground allspice
- ½ teaspoon ground cloves
- ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 16 tablespoons unsalted butter (2 sticks), softened
- ½ teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 2 large eggs plus 3 large yolks, at room temperature
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1¾ cups (12¼ ounces) granulated sugar
- 2 tablespoons light or mild molasses
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- 1 cup buttermilk, at room temperature

Frosting

- 5 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 5 pieces, softened
- 1¼ cups (4½ ounces) confectioners' sugar
- 8 ounces cream cheese, cut into 4 pieces, softened
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- ¾ cup coarsely chopped walnuts, toasted (optional)

1. **FOR THE CAKE:** Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour 13- by 9-inch baking pan. Combine spices in small bowl; reserve ½ teaspoon for frosting.

2. Heat 4 tablespoons butter in 8-inch skillet over

medium heat until melted, 1 to 2 minutes. Continue to cook, swirling pan constantly, until butter is light brown and has faint nutty aroma, 2 to 4 minutes. Add spices and continue to cook, stirring constantly, 15 seconds. Remove from heat and cool to room temperature, about 30 minutes.

3. Whisk flour, baking powder, baking soda, and salt in medium bowl. In small bowl, gently whisk eggs, yolks, and vanilla to combine. In standing mixer fitted with paddle attachment, cream remaining 12 tablespoons butter with sugar and molasses at medium-high speed until pale and fluffy, about 3 minutes, scraping down sides and bottom of bowl twice with rubber spatula. Reduce to medium speed and add cooled butter and spice mixture, ginger, and half of egg mixture; mix until incorporated, about 15 seconds. Repeat with remaining egg mixture; scrape down bowl again. Reduce to low speed; add about one-third flour mixture, followed by half of buttermilk, mixing until just incorporated after each addition, about 5 seconds. Repeat using half of remaining flour mixture and all of remaining buttermilk. Scrape bowl and add remaining flour mixture; mix at medium speed until batter is thoroughly combined, about 15 seconds. Remove bowl from mixer and fold batter once or twice with rubber spatula to incorporate any remaining flour.

4. Transfer batter to prepared pan; following illustrations at left, zigzag tip of metal spatula through batter, pulling it to pan edges. Lightly tap pan against counter 3 or 4 times to dislodge any large air bubbles; smooth surface with spatula.

5. Bake until toothpick inserted in center of cake comes out clean, 32 to 37 minutes. Cool cake to room temperature in pan on wire rack, about 2 hours.

6. **FOR THE FROSTING:** In bowl of standing mixer fitted with paddle attachment, beat butter, sugar, and reserved ½ teaspoon spice mixture at medium-high speed until light and fluffy, 1 to 2 minutes. Add cream cheese one piece at a time, beating thoroughly after each addition. Add vanilla and beat until no lumps remain, about 30 seconds.

7. Run paring knife around edge of cake to loosen from pan. Using spatula, spread frosting evenly over surface of cake. Sprinkle cake with walnuts, if using. Cut into squares and serve.

SPICE CAKE WITH ORANGE CREAM CHEESE FROSTING

Follow recipe for Spice Cake with Cream Cheese Frosting, adding 1½ teaspoons finely grated orange zest to frosting with the vanilla in step 6. Substitute toasted slivered almonds or roughly chopped hazelnuts for walnuts in step 7.

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