

Colonial Election Cake–Make American Cake Again



Election Cake

Back in our Colonial Days, elections—whether town hall meetings or national elections, were festive events. Booze was involved. And Cake. Specifically Election Cake.

I first came across election cake in an historic novel in which it is a southern tradition, but reading further, I learn that like so much of our Democratic tradition, Election Cake was born in New England. In the 18th century, they might have been commissioned by the town to feed all the citizens.



Election Day 1815 by John Lewis Kimmel

By John Lewis Krimmel (1787-1821) –

public domain

[Bon Appetit](#) says, “Muster” cake, as it was called before the American Revolution, was “a dense, naturally leavened, fruit and spice cake — baked by colonial women and given to the droves of men who were summoned for military training, or ‘mustered,’ by order of British troops.” After Independence, the tradition continued to “muster” voters to the polls.



The County Election, 1852, By George Caleb Bingham Saint Louis Art Museum official site, Public Domain.

The original recipes that I found were daunting to say the least. After all, our foremothers were baking cake for ALL the men in the village. And since the women didn't have to worry their little heads about things like campaigning or voting,

they could devote their time to a fruity, boozy cake. Their election cake could take *several* strong arms to mix ten pounds of butter into fourteen pounds of sugar, beating for half an hour.

Election Cake: Thirty quarts of flour, 10 pound butter, 14 pound sugar, 12 pound raisins, 3 doz eggs, one pint wine, one quart brandy, 4 ounces cinnamon, 4 ounces fine colander seed, 3 ounces ground alspice; wet flour with milk to the consistence of bread over night, adding one quart yeast; the next morning work the butter and sugar together for half an hour, which will render the cake much lighter and whiter; when it has rise light, work in every other ingredient except the plumbs, which work in when going into the oven. – **Simmons, American Cookery, 1796.**

According to [Nourished Kitchen](#), by the middle of the 19th century the government did not pay for election cakes. Instead pieces of cake were rewards for voting the “right” way. Nourished Kitchen explains in detail the soaking of flour in milk overnight, and why these cakes were phenomenally nutritious. The link to Nourished Kitchen will get you a modernized and slimmed-down but still very authentic recipe using sourdough starter. For my election day cake, I chose to try a new-to-me technique called pre-ferment, which makes a sourdough starter quickly with yeast, rather than feeding it for weeks.

The recipe below is from the Owl Bakery site, but I made a few tweaks that I think make it more readable for the home cook. Other than the fact that it won't feed the whole village, this is a very authentic colonial recipe. And thank goodness for electric mixers!!

If you are serving this for election night parties–don't forget the hard cider.

18th Century Recipe: Election Cake



Ingredients

- pre-ferment made in step one

pre-ferment

- 1 1/4 cup whole milk (heated to 70degrees (see note))
- 1/4 teaspoon instant yeast
- 2 3/8 cups all purpose or whole wheat pastry flour (2 1/4 Cups plus 2 Tablespoons equivalent)

cake

- 1 cup unsalted butter (room temperature)
- 3/4 cups white sugar
- 2 eggs
- 1/3 cup buttermilk (or substitute whole-milk yogurt)
- 1/4 cup honey or molasses
- 2 1/4 cups all purpose or whole wheat pastry flour
- 2 tablespoons spices (See note for suggestions)

Serves	24
Prep time	24 hours
Cook time	45 minutes
Total time	24 hours, 45 minutes
Allergy	Egg, Milk, Wheat
Meal type	Dessert
Misc	Child Friendly, Freezable, Pre-preparable, Serve Cold
Region	American
Website	Owl Bakery

- 1/4 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 2 tablespoons rum, sherry or cider (Or use equal amount liquid from reconstituted fruit)
- 2 cups dried fruits, reconstituted (See note for suggestions)

Directions

Day ONE: pre-ferment

1. Mix yeast into warm milk until totally dissolved.

pre-ferment

2. Add flour and mix until starter is consistent texture.
3. Scrape down bowl and cover with towel or plastic wrap. Allow to ferment for 8-12 hours at room temperature.
When read it will have bubbles or cavities covering surface. If you can't use it immediately, store covered in refrigerator for up to a few days.

Day ONE: Reconstituting Fruit

4. Chop dried fruits and put in small saucepan. Cover with liquor or chosen liquid. Warm over low heat for a few minutes and remove from heat. Allow to soak, covered overnight or several hours until ready to use.

Day TWO: Prepare Cake

5. Assemble and measure all ingredients. Set out eggs and milk or yogurt so they will come to room temperature.

Prepare Cake

6. Measure flour and seasonings into a small bowl and whisk until well blended.
7. Drain fruit in a strainer over a bowl or pan. Set fruit aside. Pour liquid into a separate bowl or cup.
8. Grease and flour a tube pan, two loaf pans or three-four round or square cake pans.
9. In large bowl, Beat butter until smooth. Add sugar and beat with electric mixer at least five minutes to get it very fluffy.
10. Add one egg at a time, beating thoroughly after each addition.
11. Add the molasses or honey and the yogurt or buttermilk and beat at medium speed just until combined.
12. Use dough hook on mixer or your hands to mix in the pre-ferment (starter) until incorporated, with no lumps of the starter visible.
13. Mix in dry ingredients with spoon or hands, just until incorporated. Do not over mix.
14. With wooden spoon or spatula, gently fold in the two tablespoons of liquor or other liquid, and the rehydrated fruit.
15. Put batter into pans. As a rule of thumb, the batter should only fill the pan half way or slightly less than half way. Level the top with a knife or spatula. Cover and let rise for 2-4 hours until cake has risen about 1/3 of its beginning volume.
16. Bake at 375 degrees F. for 10 minutes. Reduce heat to 375 degrees and continue baking for 25-30 minutes, until a tester comes out clean. Cool in pan on rack for 15 minutes, then remove from pan and cool completely before glazing, storing or cutting.

Store and Serve Cake

17. If you want to freeze a cake, do it without glazing. You can store the cake in a plastic zipper bag for several days or even weeks to allow the flavors to mellow. It can be eaten plain, or you can make a glaze with confectioners sugar moistened with the liquid from the reconstituted fruit, some kind of juice, or water.

Note

Although you are not busy fussing with things all the time, you must remember to start this a full day ahead of when you want to take the cake from the oven. To fully ripen the cake, give it a few more days in addition, before you serve it.

Do read the whole recipe and get out all your equipment and ingredients before you start each day.

Don't be intimidated by the pre-ferment process. The Owl Bakery recipe specifies that the starter will be covered with bubbles. Mine wasn't. I read several other recipes and many referred to the starter being the consistency of pan-cake batter. Mine was as thick as bread dough. It worked anyway!

I used rum to soak the fruit and then used two tablespoons of that rum drained off the fruit in the cake recipe. You can choose to skip the alcohol (although it all cooks off) and use cider or even strong brewed tea.

You can use whatever fruits you want. The original recipe mentions raisins and dried plums (prunes). I chose fruits I thought our New England ancestors would have--dried apples, dried blueberries, and the dried plums mentioned in the old recipe. I notice that they use currants frequently in old recipes rather than raisins, and that would work well.

Be sure you measure that 1/4 tsp of yeast--it is a small portion of one of the envelopes of yeast, if that's the kind you have.

Instead of yogurt, called for by Owl, you could use what our grandmothers would have more likely used--either buttermilk, or milk they soured themselves with a little vinegar.

I used molasses--because I love molasses and it is authentic. Also, honey has gotten terribly expensive lately. However, I did not think my cake was as sweet as it might be. I might use honey or use a sweeter fruit than the dried apples. And I would be tempted to increase the sugar by 1/4 cup.

The spice mix can be your own creation, choosing from cinnamon, allspice, nutmeg, mace, cloves, star anise.

I used 1 T cinnamon; 1/2 tsp mace, 1/2 tsp nutmeg and 1/4 tsp cloves (yeah, I know--not exactly 2 T.)

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About Vera Marie Badertscher

I am a grandma and was named for my grandma. I've been an actress, a political strategist and a writer. I grew up in various places, went to high school in Killbuck, Ohio and graduated from Ohio State University. My husband and I moved to Arizona after graduation and have three adult children. I love to travel and read. I ponder family as I cook. Look for my DNA profile on Ancestry.

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4 thoughts on “Colonial Election Cake--Make American Cake Again”



Barb Shilling

November 4, 2016 at 1:18 pm

Thanks so much for sharing your recipes! I have combined 2 to make Buttermilk "Election Cake" Biscuits. Added the following to your biscuit recipe: 1 teaspoon each of nutmeg and cinnamon to dry ingredients and adding 1/2 C golden raisins and 1/2 C dried cranberries/blueberries (soaked overnight in 3 to 4 tablespoons of rum) and 1/4 chopped pecans.



Vera Marie Badertscher

Post author

November 4, 2016 at 2:31 pm

You are very creative! That sounds absolutely delicious. I hope it is a big hit. Sounds like the perfect Thanksgiving biscuit, too, doesn't it? Thanks so much for reading and actually baking along with my ancestors.



Pam

November 4, 2016 at 4:26 pm

You know my fondness for cake. I may just make this for our election night party!!



Vera Marie Badertscher

Post author

November 5, 2016 at 11:02 am

Pam: I am so happy that you are interested in the Election Cake. BTW, as a cake lover, let me also recommend another Colonial era cake--this orange cake. (The recipe is not as authentic because it uses baking powder, but it is absolutely delicious.)<https://ancestorsinaprons.com/2016/04/colonial-orange-cake-and-book/>

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