

Baking the Perfect Christmas Cake

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You either love it or loathe it, there is nothing in between when it comes to fruit cake. There is also no other cake quite so versatile. Sliced thinly for afternoon tea or covered in marzipan for Christmas, fruit cake is a welcome addition to a table. Here is a guide to make your fruitcake the perfect Christmas cake, one family and friends will enjoy and remember fondly for years to come. These tips will give you legendary status as a maker of fine Christmas cakes.

Plan ahead

Fruit cake tastes best when it is left to mature, for at least a month. There are those devotees who swear that it is best left for three months or even longer. As this is the case you need to give your cake time to mature so plan to bake your cake at least 6 to 8 weeks before it is required.

The batter

The cake batter has to be heavy enough to hold the fruit so make sure it has enough flour in it. Skimping on the flour will result in a cake that has all the fruit at the bottom and is dry and heavy. A good rule of thumb is equal quantities of flour, butter and dark brown sugar. Add an egg for every 60g of butter. If you have a cake with 250g flour, you will have 250g brown sugar and 250g butter and four eggs.

The fruit

Use the freshest and choicest dried fruit available. You can mix and match the fruit to suit your taste. Don't like raisins? Leave them out and add in dried pineapple. Chop fruit and nuts to even sized pieces for uniformity in texture. Soak fruit overnight in brandy or if you are a non-drinker use freshly squeezed orange juice. This helps to plump the fruit before cooking and also adds a delightful flavour to the cake. Before adding the fruit to the cake dredge it in a little flour first. This helps to prevent the fruit from sinking to the bottom during cooking.

The making

Bring all the ingredients to room temperature. Make sure the butter and sugar are properly creamed, the mixture should be lightly coloured and very fluffy. Use a metal spoon to gently fold in the flour as this brings more air into the mixture than a wooden spoon or electric beaters. Lastly, gently stir in the fruit and nuts. And don't forget to get everyone in the family to have a stir for good luck.

The tin

Fruit cakes require protection during long, slow baking times. Cakes that are 22cm or smaller require three thicknesses of baking-paper lining. Larger cakes need one or two sheets of brown paper and three sheets of baking paper. Make sure to grease the top layer properly to avoid your cake sticking to the paper.

The baking

Fruit cakes take long, slow cooking. Pre heat your oven to the correct temperature cook on the correct shelf. Check after the suggested time by inserting a clean skewer into the centre of the cake. If it comes out clean the cake is done. You can also hear the fruit "singing" if the cake is properly cooked.

The storing

When fully cooked take the cake out of the oven and cool in the tin. Once completely cool wrap your cake tightly in two thicknesses of greaseproof paper and then three of newspaper. You can baste your cake with 2 tbsp brandy before wrapping and then once a week after until you are ready to cut it. Most fruit cake can be frozen but it is best left to mature for at least four weeks before freezing as it won't mature once frozen and therefore won't develop that wonderful fruity flavour and moist texture.



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