The history of CAKE!



Seren Evans-Charrington traces the **history and development of cake** as we know it, and provides **three important bygone recipes**



Cake is one of the most familiar and extraordinary icons of the modern world. For celebrations there is really nothing else quite like cake, and no wedding or children's party would be complete without it. It comes in many shapes and sizes, and there is even heated debate as to exactly what constitutes a cake – for example, is a Jaffa Cake a cake or a biscuit? And how about pancakes and cheesecakes, or chocolate-covered teacakes? Well, officially, the way to tell if a cake is indeed a cake and not a biscuit is the fact that cakes dry out as they go stale, but biscuits soften, and this was the defining culinary principle that won McVitie's their legal battle back in 1991 and saw the orange-centred delights crowned as a cake, not a biscuit. Another important difference is the fact that cake is exempt from VAT in the UK, but biscuits are not – a significant factor for a manufacturer, as classification as a biscuit would raise the price considerably!

Cakes carry lots of tradition and memories, and have a fascinating history, from ancient Greece and Rome, to mediaeval feasting tables and Victorian parlours, and even right up to modern-day creations that are often as fanciful as our imaginations and the available ingredients allow. When we talk about cakes today we think of sweet, soft and spongy creations where lightness is heralded as a virtue, but these types of cake actually have the very shortest of histories when it comes to the complete story of cake, as they only really came into existence in the mid-eighteenth century.

The earliest cakes would have fallen short of our modern-day expectations, and were really an ancient version of our modern-day oatcake – flat rounds of crushed, moistened and compacted grains. Indeed, we still use the word 'cake' to refer to compacted grains: think of rice cakes or even cattle cakes. The compacted cake survived in Britain well into the mediaeval period in the form of gingerbread, which also bore little similarity to its modern-day counterpart, being made by combining fine breadcrumbs with honey, and being flavoured with exotic spices such as grains of paradise, ginger and cinnamon. The mixture was often coloured with red wine or liquorice before being pressed into moulds and decorated. Undoubtedly such ancient compressed cakes were also regarded as treats, and would no doubt have been a centrepiece at celebrations.

However, modern cakes have other significant ancestors – porridge, pancakes and bread. The ancient batter used to make pancakes is not so very different from our raised batter cakes, whilst the enriched fruit pottage of the Middle Ages is the precursor to our plum pudding, a relative of Christmas cake. For a long time the history of both bread and cake was intertwined, with cake not regarded as a separate entity until relatively recent times.

Today, in Britain, yeast-raised bakes are no longer categorised as cake, but as late as 1861 a yeast-raised cake could be found in *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management*. It is perhaps true to say that the most significant development in the history of cake was the removal of yeast as a permitted raising agent, and this is really the point at which cake as we know it emerged. However, it's difficult to tie this development down to an exact date, but by the 1700s cake recipes raised





with eggs were becoming common, and yeast-raised cakes were coming to be regarded as plain and made for reasons of economy rather than celebration.

The modern cake was truly born when chemical raising agents came into play. The first – pearl ash, derived from wood ash – was used in American baking from the 1790s, but it gave cakes a soapy flavour, so it was swiftly replaced with bicarbonate of soda. We had to wait until 1850 for 'true' baking powder to come along. Baking powder is the real hero of the light and fluffy sponge we all enjoy today because it allows the making of soft and spongy cakes without the need for a large number of eggs and lengthy beating.

VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS FRUIT CAKE

This fruit cake is inspired by a recipe from *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management*. I have used it for many years and it produces a lighter coloured cake than many recipes that call for brown sugar, but it always provides a delicious, yet moist, cake.

INGREDIENTS

(Mrs Beeton's original was in imperial measurements, so they are included here, too.)
450g (1lb) softened butter
450g (1lb) caster sugar
450g (1lb) sultanas
340g (¾lb) candied peel
900g (2lb) flour
14g (½oz) baking powder
8 eggs
A splash of milk

METHOD

1 Sieve the baking powder and flour together into a large bowl and weigh out the fruit and candied peel onto the flour.
2 Cream the butter and sugar together in a separate large bowl, then add the eggs, one at a time, adding a pinch of flour as you go to prevent curdling.
3 Once all the eggs are added, slowly add the flour and fruit, then stir well to combine all the ingredients. If the mix is too dry, moisten with a splash of milk as required.
4 Transfer the mixture to a well-papered and greased tin and bake for 3–4 hours in a preheated oven set at 325°C.

SEREN'S TIPS!

- Delicious as this cake already is, if you like a particularly 'tipsy' cake, then you will need to 'feed' it each week before Christmas. This is done by making small holes in the top and bottom of the cake with a darning needle, then spooning over teaspoonfuls of brandy to soak in through the holes and permeate the cake.
- A great deal of time will already have gone into making your cake, so you will want to keep it at its very best. Once the cake has cooled, wrap it in a double layer of greaseproof paper and then in a double layer of foil. Secure it all with a rubber band and store it in an airtight container until needed.

WARTIME CHRISTMAS CAKE

This recipe for a fruit cake without using eggs is adapted from the notebook of a World War II housewife. Eggs were strictly rationed and many recipes were adapted for use without them. This actually makes a delicious small cake (pictured above right), and is the same recipe that I presented on BBC1's *Len Goodman's Christmas of My Lifetime* programme last year.



INGREDIENTS

(Again, the recipe includes imperial measurements, which were the norm in the 1940s.)

1 large carrot, finely grated
2–3 tbsp golden syrup
85g (3oz) sugar
115g (4oz) margarine (or butter)
1 tsp almond essence
170g (6oz) dried fruit
340g (12oz) plain flour
½ tsp cream of tartar
½ tsp bicarbonate of soda
1 tsp ground cinnamon
1 small teacup of slightly warm tea
2 tsp gravy browning

METHOD

1 Cook the grated carrot and syrup in a saucepan over a low heat for a few minutes.
2 Cream together the sugar and margarine.
3 Stir the bicarbonate of soda and cream of tartar into the syrup mixture, then beat it into the sugar and margarine, bit by bit, as if adding an egg.
4 Add the almond essence and gravy browning, then add the dried mixed fruit.
5 Fold in the sieved flour and cinnamon and add some of the tea – the batter needs to be thick but moist.
6 Put the mixture into a prepared tin, then bake for 15 minutes in a preheated oven set at 200°C.
7 Reduce the temperature to 160°C and bake for a further 45 minutes. Cover with parchment if the cake is becoming too dark.

SEREN'S TIPS!

- If you want to bake cakes in advance and freeze them, simply wrap the cakes in a cloth towel before freezing. The towel extracts the moisture from the baked goods, allowing them to be kept longer in the freezer. The same principle also works with bread!
- Whether you are looking to become the next winner of *The Great British Bake Off*, or to create a series of show-stopping creations, or you just want to bake a simple cake for immediate eating, cakes have a long and complex history, and you may want to reflect on this as you devour the last crumbs of your home-baked delights.

MEDIAEVAL GINGERBREAD

This recipe produces a gingerbread that bears little resemblance to its modern-day namesake, but it's probably like the confection that Chaucer's Sir Thomas bought in *The Canterbury Tales*. This is a slightly more modern take on period recipes from the 1400s.

INGREDIENTS

450g runny honey
400g breadcrumbs – white or brown
1 tbsp ground ginger
1 tbsp cinnamon
½ tsp white pepper

METHOD

1 Spread the breadcrumbs out evenly on a baking sheet and bake in a very low oven (110°C) for 1–1½ hours. Once baked, remove from the oven and leave to cool.
2 Bring the honey slowly to the boil in a heavy-based saucepan and skim off any scum.
3 Keeping the pan over a very low heat, add the spices, then slowly beat in the breadcrumbs. Add just enough breadcrumbs to achieve a thick, stiff and well-blended mass.
4 Remove from the heat and turn the mixture out onto a lightly greased (butter works best) baking sheet.
5 Spread the gingerbread evenly over the tray using a rolling pin, or, if your hands can withstand it, press it down with your fingertips.
6a Turn the baking sheet over onto wax paper or parchment paper, tap gently until the gingerbread falls from the pan, then cut into small squares to serve.
6b Alternatively, press the mixture into a well-greased novelty tin or mould, and decorate with icing, crystallised fruit and anything else that takes your fancy.



