

Host the holidays with homemade fruitcake

Holiday hosting is a big responsibility. Hosts must make their guests feel welcome and comfortable, which often involves finding space for out-of-towners to lay their heads and cleaning the home to ensure no one is put off by the dust and dirt that can accumulate over time.

Hosting also involves feeding guests, and many hosts aim to provide the usual holiday treasure trove of baked goods for their friends and family. Baking can satisfy holiday sweet tooths, and the smell of baked goods can create that welcoming feeling hosts aim for. Some foods are synonymous with certain times of year, and fruitcake is one food that’s enjoyed almost exclusively during the holiday season. Fruitcake is sometimes an object of ridicule, but homemade fruitcake, such as the following recipe from Jeanne Sauvage’s “Gluten-Free Baking For the Holidays” (Chronicle Books), is sure to please those guests devoted to this holiday staple.

Fruitcake

Serves 10 to 15

Macerated Fruit

- 2-1/2 pounds raisins, pitted prunes, pitted dates, and dried figs, finely chopped
- 1/2 cup candied orange and/or lemon peel, finely chopped
- 1/3 cup candied or dried cherries, finely chopped
- 2/3 cup candied or preserved ginger, finely chopped
- Grated zest and juice of 1 large lemon
- Grated zest and juice of 1 large orange
- 1 tablespoon orange or tangerine marmalade
- 1 tablespoon apricot jam
- 1 cup applesauce
- 2 tablespoons brandy, sweet sherry or apple juice
- 1 cup unsalted butter, at room temperature, plus more for greasing
- 3 cups Jeanne’s Gluten-Free All-Purpose Flour (see below)
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon ground allspice
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1 cup packed dark brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 4 extra-large eggs, at room temperature
- 2 tablespoons brandy, rum, whiskey, sweet sherry, or apple juice, or as needed

The day before you bake the cake, prepare the macerated fruit. Place the raisins, prunes, dates, and figs in a large bowl. Add the citrus peel, cherries, ginger, lemon zest and juice, and orange zest and juice. Add the marmalade, jam, applesauce, and brandy and stir to combine. Cover the bowl and let stand overnight at room temperature so that the fruits soak up the liquid and the flavors meld. The mixture can macerate in the refrigerator for up to 1 week.

Preheat the oven to 325 F. If the fruit has been in the refrigerator, bring it to room temperature. Grease the bottom and sides of a 9 1/2- or 10-inch springform pan with butter. Line the bottom with three layers of parchment paper and the sides with one layer of parchment. The batter will be very sticky.

In a medium bowl, mix together the flour, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, allspice, and baking powder.

In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, beat the butter on medium-high speed until light and fluffy, about 3 minutes. Add the brown sugar and beat for 1 minute. Reduce the speed to low, add the vanilla, and beat until combined. Add the eggs, one at a time, beating after each addition. Then beat for 1 minute longer. Add the flour mixture and beat until just combined. Add the macerated fruit and, with a large wooden spoon, combine with the batter. This requires a bit of strength. Scrape the batter into the prepared pan.

Bake for 2 hours, then reduce the oven temperature to 300 F and bake until a toothpick inserted into the middle of the cake comes out clean, about 2 hours. If the cake browns too quickly, you might want to tent it with aluminum foil for the last 2 hours so it doesn’t burn.

Remove the cake from the oven and, while it is still hot, pierce it all over with a skewer. Pour the brandy over the top. Place the pan on a wire rack and let the cake cool completely.

Remove the sides from the pan and peel the parchment paper from the sides and bottom of the cake. Wrap the cake in waxed paper and place it in an airtight container or wrap it in a few layers of plastic wrap. Leave the cake at room temperature for 3 to 5 days to allow the flavors to meld. If you used alcohol, you may store the cake in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.

Once the cake is sliced, store in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 1 week.

Jeanne’s Gluten-Free All-Purpose Flour

Makes 4 1/2 cups

- 1-1/4 cups brown rice flour
- 1-1/4 cups white rice flour
- 1 cup sweet rice flour
- 1 cup tapioca flour
- Scant 2 teaspoons xanthan gum

In a large bowl, whisk together the brown and white rice flours, sweet rice flour, tapioca flour, and xanthan gum thoroughly. Transfer the mix to an airtight container. Store in a cool, dark place for up to 6 weeks or in the refrigerator for up to 4 months.

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travel door-to-door singing and offering a drink from a wassail bowl in exchange for gifts. Wassailing has been mentioned in certain Christmas carols, including “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.”

Largely an English tradition, wassailing was brought to America by British settlers. January 17th, the old Twelfth Night, is the traditional date for wassailing. Although wassailing has largely fallen by the wayside, increased interest in ales and craft brewing may help revitalize this Christmas tradition, which can inspire community spirit.

Gift-giving with fruit cake is another tradition that has been much maligned and does not enjoy the same popularity that it once did. Fruit cake is a cake made with chopped

candied fruit, nuts and spices and is occasionally soaked in spirits. Fruit cakes have been enjoyed all over the world, but Americans may never have embraced the Christmas fruit cake tradition as much as those from other countries. However, with the right recipe and an open mind, it may be possible to resurrect the fruit cake tradition once again.

Mummers plays are another British tradition that arrived in North America with settlers but has largely fallen by the wayside. Mummers plays involved miming folk dramas, and the plays were commonplace around the holiday season. Celebrants may want to research such dramas and include them in this year’s festivities to liven up celebrations even more.

Traditions passed

on through the years help make Christmas a favorite time of celebration. People may want to explore the less popular traditions today and once again make them interesting parts of this year’s festivities.

Tips to prolong the life of your Christmas tree

Christmas trees are symbols of the holiday season and the spirit of giving that the season champions. Choosing and decorating a Christmas tree is a tradition for many families, and depending on the trees they choose, families may have some work to do to keep their trees glowing all season long.

Artificial Christmas trees require little, if any, maintenance. But live Christmas trees, which some people feel are more authentic and welcoming than their artificial counterparts, require daily maintenance. In addition to supplying the tree with water at least once per day, live Christmas tree owners can take these steps to prolong the life of their trees.

- Protect the tree on the way home. Your tree might be vulnerable to damage as you transport it from the farm to your living room. Unwrapped trees placed atop vehicles can be dried out by the wind. Prevent wind damage by wrapping the tree if you plan to place it atop your vehicle. If possible, lay the tree in the bed of a pickup truck and close the cover over the bed. If you don’t have access to a pickup truck but can use a minivan or SUV to transport your tree, see if the tree fits inside your vehicle. If it doesn’t, wrap it tightly in a blanket or another form

of cover, making sure the cover won’t blow off in the wind when you hit the open road.

- Have the tree cut before you take it off the lot. If you typically purchase your tree from a florist or tree lot instead of a tree farm, then remember to ask the seller to recut the stem of the tree before you take it home. Tree farm trees are freshly cut, but trees sold away from the farm might have been chopped down weeks before they are ultimately sold. During the interval between being cut down and sold, trees’ vascular systems can clog and prevent the tree from getting the water it needs to survive the season. A fresh cut of the stem unclogs the system and ensures the tree will be able to consume water.
- Avoid placing the tree near heaters or drafty windows. Many people know that placing a live tree near a potentially hot heating vent poses a fire hazard. But doing so also can dry out the tree, decreasing the chances it will make it through the season. Placing the tree near drafty windows also can dry out the tree, so try to find a spot in your home with a consistent temperature.
- Water the tree often. Christmas trees need lots of water to make it through the season. You may notice the water

in the tree stand disappears quickly when you first bring the tree home. That’s because freshly cut trees will consume more water than trees that were cut several weeks ago. As the season goes on and the tree’s vascular system begins to clog, you might not need to water the tree as much as you did when you first brought it home. But check the tree’s water stand twice per day when you first bring it home, refilling the stand with water whenever necessary.

A few tricks of the trade can help holiday celebrants maintain lush, awe-inspiring Christmas trees throughout the holiday season.

Did you know?

Christmas songs provide the soundtrack for holiday magic. Such songs evoke strong feelings in people, and various songs have become staples at holiday celebrations. Some interesting facts and history surround many popular Christmas songs. “White Christmas,” for example, is the best-selling Christmas song of all time. However, “Silent Night” is the most recorded Christmas song in history, says TIME. “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town” is considered a jolly song, but songwriter James Gillespie was unemployed and had just lost his brother prior to writing the song. Still, he was able to look past his grief to pen the classic. Many are unaware that “Jingle Bells” originally was supposed to be a Thanksgiving song. While many beloved Christmas songs have been around for decades, one artist managed to tap into the success of classic Christmas music. Mariah Carey’s “All I Want for Christmas Is You” is a popular modern-day Christmas song.

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