

Piece of fruitcake!

It's time to start the Christmas fruitcake if you want it moist and mellow, and **Pauline D. Loh** entertains you with some tongue-in-cheek facts while you wait for the cake to bake.

Matured to a rich dark juiciness, the fruitcake holds together a rainbow of fruits and nuts macerated in richly aromatic liqueurs. Such a delicious confectionery deserves a lot more respect that it actually gets. Witness how the fruitcake is also culinary history's most maligned morsel.

Calling someone a "fruitcake" is not complimentary. In fact, you would be lucky not to have your nose bloodied if you banded this term about too freely. There are also countless jokes written about unwilling recipients at Christmas who recycle their Aunt Bettina's fruitcake gift to other unsuspecting relatives.

In the United States, satirical pieces about rock-hard fruitcakes have been published in as varied publications as the Rolling Stone, Village Voice and the venerable New York Times. Punch magazine, before its untimely demise, made Christmas fruitcake jokes a standard reader-pleaser every year.

I also read somewhere, sources unspecified, that airlines still ban whole fruitcakes on board because they are so dense that a weapon can be baked inside to escape detection.

Its actual history is less exciting, and the fruitcake is a relatively new addition to the Christmas dinner repertoire, arriving as it were, only in the 18th century. In England, it is believed to be a relative of the plum pudding and in America, immigrants coming in with the *Mayflower* added their own embellishments.

The long and short of it was: The fruitcake was a celebration of abundance, a remembrance of the bounty of the fruit and nut harvests of the past year, all of which was carefully stored and preserved by the country cook to reappear in one single cake.

The Oxford Companion to Food says: "Fruitcakes have been used for celebrations since at least the early 18th century when bride cakes and plumb cakes, descended from enriched bread recipes, became cookery standards ..."

"Making a rich fruitcake in the 18th century was a major undertaking. The ingredients had to be carefully prepared. Fruit was washed, dried, and stoned if necessary; sugar, cut from loaves, had to be pounded and sieved; butter washed in water and rinsed in rosewater. Eggs were beaten for a long time, half an hour being commonly directed. Yeast, from fermenting beer, had to be coaxed to life. Finally, the cook had to cope with the temperamental wood-fired baking ovens of that time. No wonder these cakes acquired such mystique ..."

There is little mystery left to the fruitcake.

Modern cooking techniques, automated ovens, 350 watt kitchen mixers and a cornucopia of dried fruits and nuts readily available on supermarket shelves have turned fruitcake making into ... well, a piece of cake.

This traditional piece of celebration showcase can be both good-looking and good tasting. Instead of the stale, damp and dark lumps that used to represent fruitcakes, they can be a whole spectrum of colors and textures and tastes.

My favorite recipe is a Jewel Fruitcake that I first made more than 20 years ago as a fledgling cook. It was also my first great success at baking — mainly

because it was so very hard to go wrong with the recipe.

It did not insist that I painstakingly chop up every fruit. It did not matter if the butter and eggs curdled a little, it did not matter if I had a little more nuts and a little less fruit. I also added little cubes of marzipan, which melted in the mouth with a nutty fragrance and neutralized the need for too much sugar.

Best of all, the cake keeps well for months, improving with weekly libations of whatever liqueur is handy ... and it guarantees you compliments and repeat requests for more.

This recipe is also extremely pretty, because the slices displayed the jewel-like colors of the whole glace cherries and dried fruits — hence its name.

I am still making it after all these years, and I'm sharing my recipe with you to prove that fruitcake does not have to taste like raisin sludge.

As for the long baking time, you do not have to stand guard in the kitchen. As long as you prepare your tins properly with double layers of baking parchment, you don't have to keep checking. Most modern ovens will give an ear-splitting beep to tell you when your cake is baked.

Or, shortcut the process with a chocolate flavored fruitcake that takes less than an hour in all. The trick is to add really good cocoa powder. For me, it has to be Valrhona cocoa powder for its rich intensity.

For the chocolate cake, keep your fruit mix simple. I would say a combination of dried figs and golden raisins work well with the addition of either walnuts or pecans.

Fruitcakes are traditionally doused in liqueur to improve its shelf life and flavor, but it does not need to be so. I have made a deliciously light fruitcake that uses no liqueur and it always turns out moist and just as rich. I have included the recipe here for readers who cannot, or will not, take alcohol.

Finish off your fruitcakes with a simple icing. I think that the usual marzipan and royal icing toppings are both a waste of the cook's time and money. Only children nibble at the rock-hard sugar coating and most adults will politely peel off the icing and hide it under uneaten cake.

Instead, glaze your cake with a jam varnish and place more fruits and nuts on top. A simple dusting of icing sugar and a few well-placed bright red cherries will add to the festive look, while a thin drizzle of lemon icing is a zesty alternative.

If you like your fruitcake more mature and mellow, start baking now. Let your cakes cool completely, then wrap in plastic wrap and foil. Start the countdown by taking the cake out and soaking it with a good orange liqueur like Cointreau.

Decorate your cake a day or two before the actual festivities and I assure you, the fruitcakes will disappear faster than anyone can say "Aunt Bettina"!

RECIPE | JEWELLED FRUITCAKE

Ingredients:
200 g raisins
200 g sultanas
200 g dried apricots, halved
200 g whole dried cherries
100 g chopped walnuts
100 g whole almonds
500 g marzipan, diced
200 g plain flour
1 tsp baking powder
1 tsp salt
1 tsp mixed spices (or 5-spice powder)
200 g butter, softened
100 g soft brown sugar

6 tbsp orange marmalade
4 eggs (55 g each)
1 cup strong black tea
1 cup whiskey, brandy or any liqueur

Method:

1. Combine dried fruits and nuts and macerate in the tea and liqueur overnight, covered.
2. Line the bottom of a well-buttered 20-cm pan with a double thickness of parchment paper.
3. Sift flour, baking powder and five-spice powder together.
4. Cream butter, brown sugar until the



PHOTOS BY PAULINE D. LOH / FOR CHINA DAILY

RECIPE | LIGHT FRUITCAKE

Ingredients:
200 g chopped pecans
150 g dried apricots, quartered
100 g golden sultanas
100 g whole candied cherries
200 g all purpose flour
250 g butter, room temperature
120 g sugar
5 eggs (55g each)
2 tsp vanilla extract
1 tsp baking powder
Pinch of salt

Method:

1. Grease and flour tube cake pan.
2. Sprinkle fruits and nuts with a little flour and toss to coat.
3. Cream butter with sugar until light and fluffy. Beat eggs one at a time, and

- add vanilla extract.
4. Sift flour with baking powder and salt. Add dry ingredients to batter and stir to blend.
5. Mix fruit mixture into batter.
6. Pour batter into prepared pan. Bake until golden brown and tester inserted into center comes out clean, about one and half hours.
7. Cool in pan and turn out onto rack and cool. Ice with drizzling lemon-flavored icing and decorate with whole cherries and apricots.

Food notes:

To make lemon icing, simply squeeze and sieve juice of one lemon. Slowly add sifted icing sugar until you get a slightly stiff but still liquid icing. Drizzle immediately. Decorate with cherry halves. Icing will set as it dries out.

RECIPE | CHOCOLATE FRUITCAKE

Ingredients:
200 g large dried figs, diced
100 g golden raisins
100 g walnuts (or pecans), roughly chopped
50 ml orange liqueur
50 ml brandy
150 g soft brown sugar
150 g plain flour
50 g unsweetened cocoa powder
2 tsp five-spice powder
2 tsp baking powder
50 ml apple juice
50 ml plain yoghurt
120 g butter, melted and cooled
3 eggs (55 g each)

Method:

1. Mix dried fruits and liqueur and let stand for an hour or overnight.
2. Prepare loaf pan by buttering and papering with a double thickness of parchment paper.
3. Drain fruit mixture and reserve juices.
4. Mix sugar, flour, cocoa powder, spice powder and baking powder together.
5. Whisk together melted butter, eggs, apple juice and yoghurt. Fold in flour mixture and add reserved dried fruit juices and dried fruits and chopped walnuts.

mixture is light and fluffy and beat in eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition. Add marmalade and mix well.

5. Fold in flour mixture into the creamed mixture. Then fold in fruits and nuts.
6. Combine well and turn the batter out into the prepared pan.
8. Bake the cake for 2 hours at 160 C, checking that the top does not over-brown. If it does, cover with a piece of foil.
9. When cake is done, turn out to cool on rack. Brush top with apricot jam while it is still warm and arrange



6. Pour batter into lined loaf pan and bake in 170 C oven or until a skewer comes out clean, about 35 to 40 minutes.
7. Rest in pan for 10 minutes and turn out on a rack to cool completely. Just before serving, dust top with icing sugar and sifted cocoa and decorate with Christmas figurines.

Food notes:

This cake can be made two or three days ahead. Keep moist by wrapping in cling-wrap and decorate before serving. This cake should be eaten within a week as it will not keep like a traditional fruitcake.

- cherries and nuts to decorate. Brush with more apricot jam to set.
10. When completely cool, wrap in plastic wrap and foil and store. It will keep in fridge and mature. Stores up to six months. Moisten with occasional drizzles of your favorite liqueur.

Food notes:

Serve thin slices of this cake to display the jewel-like fruits and nuts. You can top the cake with a drizzle of lemon icing or just a snowfall of icing sugar. Come Christmas, stick on some silver bells of a sprig of holly.

FOOD REVIEWS | YE JUN

Grace and taste

Beautiful, healthy and light food best describes the work of Vanessa Grace, new chef de cuisine at China Grill, Park Hyatt Hotel Beijing. Grace is the first woman chef de cuisine at the restaurant, a rarity in a male-dominated business.

A woman's delicate sensibilities are no doubt part of the reason why the food matching is so exquisite. For instance, tomato tarte is paired with arugula salad, while flavorsome duck rillettes with cherry relish really tempt the taste buds. Jamon Serrano, a dry-cured Spanish ham, is quality stuff, and pairing it with Parmesan crisps brings out the best in the ham.

Cauliflower soup is warming with the addition of bacon chantilly, while the gruyere beignet is a novel experience for most Chinese people. Grilled Australian beef tenderloin has a near-perfect tenderness; and Boston lobster is freshly poached and delightfully sided with sweetcorn puree. Calvados braised pork belly is a must-try, as it manages to avoid being too greasy.

The chocolate fondant with vanilla bean ice cream shows some creativity, but the hot fondant melts really fast on the cold ice cream.

Grace started her career at Jupiters Hotel and Casino in Queensland, Australia. Her passion for cooking as a youngster led her to be good at using seasonal ingredients, and infusing novel elements into classic cooking styles. Her last chef de cuisine job was at The Lizard Island Resort and she's now ready to absorb elements from different cultures.



IF YOU GO

Lunch: 11:30 am-2:30 pm,
Monday-Friday; noon-3 pm,
Saturday-Sunday.
Dinner: 6-10:30 pm.
66/F Park Hyatt Beijing, 2
Jianguomenwai Dajie, Chaoyang district. 010-8567-1099

Thailand dinner party

Beijing Marriott Hotel City Wall recently held a "Destination Thailand" themed dinner party for 220 guests, along with another 12 Marriott International Hotels from Beijing and Tianjin. Supported by the Royal Thailand Embassy and Marriott Thailand hotels, the event was part of a global effort by Marriott International Hotels to revive tourism and inspire travel to Thailand.

Seventeen Marriott International Hotels in Thailand, together with over 3,400 Marriott International Hotels around the world, banded together to host "the world's largest Thai dinner", in Guinness World Records style. Participants watched Thai-style performances, while sampling Thai cuisine. Chefs from Marriott prepared such classic dishes as Tom Yam Goong, Phad Thai rice noodles, curry steamed fish, Thai chicken salad, fish cake, and coconut milk juice. The dishes were authentic and savory.

Event organizers gave away a few lucky draw prizes, including meal vouchers and a free stay at Marriott hotels. The grand prize was two return air tickets to Thailand, and six nights stay at two Marriott hotels.

IF YOU GO

7 Jianguomenwai Dajie,
Chaoyang district, Beijing.
010-5811-8888

WINE REVIEWS | STEPHEN QUINN

A little age does wonders for these pinot noir

We return to New Zealand's Central Otago, the country's premier region in the deep south, to talk about wondrous pinot noir. The Central Otago Winegrowers' Association provided a case of what it considers the region's best wines, and some of these are reviewed this week.

The 2008 Wooing Tree sandstorm reserve is dark cherry in color and tastes of ripe cherries and plums. Michael Cooper in his Buyer's Guide to New Zealand Wine rated the 2007 version as worthy of five stars, his top award. At \$100 a bottle the price may seem high, but that is what you must pay to access the limited quantities of this special wine. It is made from low-yielding vines at the family-owned estate in the heart of Central Otago, near the town of Cromwell.

The wine is dark, brooding and exclusive. Tasted again after being opened for two days, the wine was still fresh, suggesting longevity. The Wooing Tree name comes from the fact that courting couples used to meet under the tree that features on the label of the company's best wines.

If you are able to resist its brooding and restrained charms this wine should be cellared for at least five years. The wine is available from high-end hotels in Hong Kong.

Another reserve pinot noir, the 2009 Aurum Mathilde, also developed nicely after being open for two days. Leaving a complex wine open for a couple of days offers a way to get a sense of how it might develop. This may seem a brutal process but exposure to air accelerates how it will taste in years to come. The Aurum is dark cherry in color with aromas of spice and thyme. The finish has hints of dark chocolate.

An image of a golden Greek bowl adorns the label. Aurum is the Latin word for gold. This treasure of a wine is available from New Zealand Wine Ltd in Causeway Bay in Hong Kong.

Grapes were hand harvested from the Lowburn area of Central Otago and given the wine comes from relatively young vines, planted in 2001, it is complex yet approachable. A spine of dusty tannins suggests this wine should be cellared for at least five years to appreciate its full potential.

Mathilde is the name of the first-born daughter of wine-makers Brook and Lucie Lawrence. Brook met his wife while they were working at Domaine d'Arlot in Nuit St. Georges in Burgundy. Their creation sells for about \$35 at the cellar door. It was matured for 14 months in French oak, a quarter of it new.