

Gingerbread Layer Cake

Leave gingerbread people to the kids. The best vehicle for seriously sophisticated flavor is a tender, moist showstopper cake.

≧ BY ANDREA GEARY ≦

As I get older, I find myself increasingly drawn to the dark side. Before you start to worry for my immortal soul, let me clarify: I'm talking gingerbread. I've made the same gently spiced, fancifully frosted gingerbread cookies every Christmas since I was 12 years old, but I no longer find them all that satisfying. What I really crave is dark, moist gingerbread cake, the kind with an intriguing hint of bitterness and a peppery finish. Unfortunately, it's usually a homely, unadorned square or loaf, and it might even be a bit sunken and damp. Such rusticity, no matter how delicious, seems out of place on a fancy holiday table.

But if I could transform humble gingerbread into a stately layer cake, I'd have a dessert to satisfy both my sense of occasion and my desire for complex ginger flavor. Ideally, it would deliver all the dark moistness and spicy punch of traditional gingerbread but in a more sophisticated package.

Feel the Burn

I started with a recipe for a regal-looking four-layer cake that contained both molasses and stout, which I hoped would provide a touch of bitterness and a dramatically dark crumb. The other attraction? It looked really easy to make.

I combined the molasses and stout and stirred in some baking soda, a traditional step that neutralizes acidic ingredients and seems to allow ginger flavor to shine through. (At least that's what my tasters concluded when I did a side-by-side test with a cake in which I'd added the baking soda to the dry ingredients instead.) Next, I whisked in eggs, vegetable oil, and both brown and granulated sugars. Then I stirred in the other dry ingredients: flour, ginger and other ground spices, baking powder, and salt. I divided the batter between two 8-inch round cake pans and baked them.

The stout and molasses produced a beautiful dark crumb with great depth, but the cake lacked



We pack in plenty of ground ginger along with the freshly grated kind and then add flavorful sparkle with a garnish of chopped crystallized ginger.

a gingery zing despite containing 2 tablespoons of ground ginger. Also, it was overly moist at the center, which made splitting each layer tricky.

For my next batch, I ruthlessly stripped out all the extraneous spices—cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, and cardamom—so the ginger could be the sole focus. I augmented the fiery ground ginger with 1 tablespoon of the sweet and spicy grated fresh kind. And yet the ginger flavor was still not as intense as I wanted it to be. In fact, this cake was heading toward downright boring. I doubled the fresh ginger and added back a bit of cinnamon—barely detectable but enough to support the ginger.

And how better to increase pepperiness than to add actual pepper? I opted for white pepper, which is made by soaking fully ripened black peppercorns in water to ferment before removing their outer seed coats. Although stripping the seed coats removes many of the volatile oils and aroma compounds responsible for pepper's heat, the fermentation period gives white pepper an earthy, floral flavor. I also added a pinch of sinus-clearing cayenne.

Now the flavor was just where I wanted it. But the cake was still so sticky that I couldn't picture splitting it successfully. Also, I had objections to a couple of ingredients.

Smart Subs

Brown sugar is just molasses mixed with granulated sugar, so did this recipe really require all three? I took out the brown sugar and increased the granulated, and I got the same flavor with one less ingredient.

Now, about that stout. I wondered if there was anything that could do the same job without requiring (for me, at least) a trip to the liquor store. As it happens, I'm a coffee drinker, and coffee ticked both the "dark color" and "bitter edge" boxes and supplied a different but equally likeable flavor.

But unfortunately the cake was still overly moist and sticky. The batter was quite loose, so I could fix the excess moisture problem by cutting back on the molasses or coffee or adding a bit more flour. But both strategies would lighten the color and dull the flavor. Instead, I added a conventional ingredient that's unconventional in gingerbread: cocoa powder. Cocoa contains a high proportion of absorbent starch. Just ¼ cup of it soaked up the cake's excess moisture, so the crumb

was no longer objectionably sticky. The cocoa also deepened the color and flavor without making the cake taste chocolaty. As a bonus, it made the crumb more tender (see "Cocoa Powder Packs a Punch").

Now the cake layers were less sticky, but the prospect of splitting them to make my coveted four-layer cake remained daunting. Well, I thought, if I wanted to end up with four layers, why couldn't I

Cocoa Powder Packs a Punch

Just ¼ cup of cocoa powder offers multiple benefits to our Gingerbread Layer Cake, all without making it taste discernibly chocolaty.

- Its bitterness provides complexity and helps balance the sugar's sweetness.
- Its superabsorbent starch soaks up excess moisture from the molasses and coffee.
- It dilutes the gluten in the mix, making a more tender cake.
- It deepens the color of the crumb.



► Andrea Bakes the Cake

A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/dec17

just bake them that way? It was a tiny bit more work to bake four layers in two batches, but because the slimmer layers baked and cooled more quickly than two thicker ones, the whole process clocked in about 30 minutes faster. (See “A Faster, Better Route to Four Layers.”) And because they set up faster, the thinner cakes didn’t have a chance to dome (caused by the outside setting faster than the middle), so I ended up with nice flat layers. Accuse me of splitting hairs, but I’ll tell you what I’m not doing: splitting layers.

Fearless Frosting

As for frosting, the usual cream cheese frosting seemed too ordinary. I seized the opportunity to try out an old-fashioned (and frankly odd-sounding) recipe: ermine frosting. You cook flour, cornstarch, milk, and sugar in a pot until the mixture is thick. When it cools to a gel, you whip it with soft butter and a bit of vanilla. I was skeptical, but devotees described it as fluffy, creamy, and not too sweet. I gave it a try, finding that the cooled gel, with its gray, translucent cast, didn’t look promising. Things didn’t improve when I mixed the gel into the butter (which I had beaten in a stand mixer until fluffy), as the mixture appeared curdled. But with continued whipping, it formed one of the lushest, silkiest frostings I had ever seen (see “Three Stages of Ermine Frosting”). Its simple flavor was the perfect complement to my spicy cake.

I sprinkled chopped crystallized ginger along the top edge of the cake for flavor and sparkle, and with that, my holiday gingerbread revamp was complete.

GINGERBREAD LAYER CAKE

SERVES 12 TO 16

Transferring the milk mixture to a wide bowl will ensure that it cools within 2 hours. A rasp-style grater makes quick work of grating the ginger. Use a 2-cup liquid measuring cup to portion the cake batter. Baking four thin cake layers two at a time eliminates the need to halve thicker layers. Do not use blackstrap molasses here, as it is too bitter.

Frosting

- 1½ cups (10½ ounces) sugar
- ¼ cup (1¼ ounces) all-purpose flour
- 3 tablespoons cornstarch
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1½ cups milk
- 24 tablespoons (3 sticks) unsalted butter, softened
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract

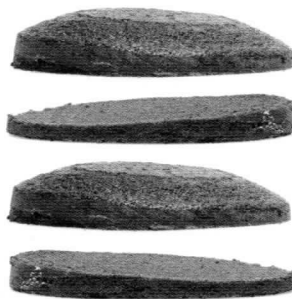
Cake

- 1¾ cups (8¾ ounces) all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup (¾ ounce) unsweetened cocoa powder
- 2 tablespoons ground ginger
- 1½ teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon ground white pepper
- ⅛ teaspoon cayenne pepper

TECHNIQUE | A FASTER, BETTER ROUTE TO FOUR LAYERS

Instead of taking the usual approach of painstakingly halving two thick cake rounds horizontally, we came up with a new approach: We simply bake four thin cake layers, two at a time.

The slim layers bake and cool more quickly than the thicker ones, so the whole process is about 30 minutes faster. What’s more, the rapid baking ensures that the layers stay flat, with none of the doming caused when the outside edge of the cake bakes faster than the middle.



2 THICK LAYERS HALVED HORIZONTALLY

Thicker layers are difficult to cut evenly, take longer to bake, and tend to dome in the oven.



4 SLIM LAYERS BAKED IN 2 BATCHES OF 2

Slim, even layers bake more quickly, cool faster, and don’t need to be split in half.

- 1 cup brewed coffee
- ¾ cup molasses
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- 1½ cups (10½ ounces) sugar
- ¾ cup vegetable oil
- 3 large eggs, beaten
- 2 tablespoons finely grated fresh ginger
- ¼ cup chopped crystallized ginger (optional)

1. FOR THE FROSTING: Whisk sugar, flour, cornstarch, and salt together in medium saucepan. Slowly whisk in milk until smooth. Cook over medium heat, whisking constantly and scraping corners of saucepan, until mixture is boiling and is very thick, 5 to 7 minutes. Transfer milk mixture to wide bowl and let cool completely, about 2 hours.

2. FOR THE CAKE: Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour two 8-inch round cake pans and line pans with parchment paper. Whisk flour, cocoa, ground ginger, baking powder, cinnamon, salt, pepper, and cayenne together in large bowl. Whisk coffee, molasses, and baking soda in second large bowl until combined. Add sugar, oil, eggs, and fresh ginger to coffee mixture and whisk until smooth.

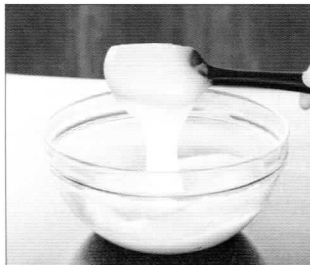
3. Whisk coffee mixture into flour mixture until smooth. Pour 1⅓ cups batter into each prepared pan. Bake until toothpick inserted in center of cake comes out clean, 12 to 14 minutes. Let cakes cool in pans on wire rack for 10 minutes. Invert cakes onto wire rack and peel off parchment; reinvert cakes. Wipe pans clean with paper towels. Grease and flour pans and line with fresh parchment. Repeat baking and cooling process with remaining batter.

4. Using stand mixer fitted with paddle, beat butter on medium-high speed until light and fluffy, about 5 minutes. Add cooled milk mixture and vanilla; mix on medium speed until combined, scraping down bowl if necessary. Increase speed to medium-high and beat until frosting is light and fluffy, 3 to 5 minutes.

5. Place 1 cake layer on platter or cardboard round. Using offset spatula, spread ¾ cup frosting evenly over top, right to edge of cake. Repeat stacking and frosting with 2 more cake layers and 1½ cups frosting. Place final cake layer on top and spread remaining frosting evenly over top and sides of cake. Garnish top of cake with crystallized ginger, if using. Refrigerate cake until frosting is set, about 30 minutes. (Cake can be refrigerated, covered, for up to 2 days. Let cake come to room temperature before serving.)

TECHNIQUE | THREE STAGES OF ERMINE FROSTING

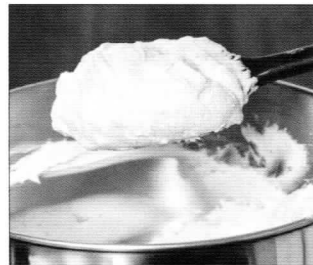
For this cake, we chose old-fashioned ermine frosting, which deserves a revival. This frosting gets its name from an unlikely source: a weasel with a shiny white coat. It relies on a water-in-oil emulsion for its silky texture. As butter is whipped into a milk-based gel, air is incorporated and the frosting gradually emulsifies (the water in the milk is dispersed as tiny droplets in the butterfat), looking curdled before becoming light and fluffy.



COOL COOKED GEL



COMBINE WITH BUTTER



WHIP UNTIL VELVETY