

Easy Action Christmas Cake by Nigella Lawson

Ingredients

- 6 cups best-quality mixed dried fruit
- 170g unsalted butter
- 1-1/2 cups dark brown sugar
- 3/4 cup sweetened chestnut puree or spread
- 1/2 cup dark rum
- Juice and zest of 1 orange
- Zest of 1 lemon
- 3 large eggs, beaten
- 1-2/3 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cloves
- 1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg

To Decorate

- 4 tablespoons smooth apricot jam
- Approximately 2 cups assorted glacé fruits, blanched almonds, pecans and marrons glacés

Method

1. Preheat the oven to 300°F (though you might prefer to do this after the fruits and so forth have started bubbling in their pan). Line the sides and bottom of a deep 8-inch round cake pan with a double layer of wax paper. The wax paper should be higher than the sides of the pan. Wrap a double layer of brown paper (the kind used for parcels) around the outside of the pan, tying it with string. The paper should be double the height of the pan, and this gives an extra layer of insulation for the cake so that it cooks slowly. If you don't have any brown paper, it is not absolutely necessary, but it will keep the cake from becoming too dark around the sides and top.

2. Put the dried fruit, butter, sugar, chestnut puree or spread, rum and orange juice and zests into a large wide saucepan and bring to the boil gently, stirring as the butter melts. Simmer the mixture for 10 minutes, and then take it off the heat and leave to stand for 30 minutes, by which time the fruits will have been soured and the mixture cooled slightly. Now, add the beaten eggs, flour, baking powder and spices and stir to combine.

3. Pour the fruit cake mixture very carefully into the prepared cake pan. Place in the oven and bake for 1-3/4 to 2 hours, by which time the top of the cake should be firm and dry and will have cracked a little. If you insert a cake tester into the middle of the cake it will still come out a little sticky.

4. Put the cake on a cooling rack and take off the brown paper from around the outside of the pan. It will hold its heat and take a long while to cool, but once it has cooled completely, unmold it from the pan and wrap the cake well in a layer of wax paper and then aluminum foil until you want to decorate it. Spoon the apricot jam into a saucepan and add a tablespoon of water. Heat gently, stirring to make a sticky glaze and then take off the heat to cool.

5. Paint the top of the cake with the apricot glaze, and then decorate with the fruits and nuts of your choice. I find it easier to cut the glaze fruits into pieces and then fit everything together like a jigsaw puzzle.

When the top is completely covered in the glacé fruits and nuts, paint a second coat of apricot glaze over the top to give a glossy finish. The cake will keep for a couple of months well wrapped and in a cool dark place.

6. If you want a more boozy offering you can feed the cake with 3 tablespoons more rum as soon as it gets out of the oven. That's to say, pierce the top of the cake several times with a fine skewer, spoon over the rum and let it sink in.

You can also play with the fruits and taste of the cake; for instance, substitute apricot jam for the chestnut puree and halve the mixed dried fruit, making up the weight with chopped dried apricots, replace the rum with apricot brandy, add a drop of almond extract to the cake mixture and cover with slivered almonds as you bake. Obviously, it will not need icing or any fruit topping. Or you can reduce the fruit mixture, throw in many natural colored glacé cherries, quartered to make up the weight and replace the rum with cherry brandy and when the cake's cool, glaze with sieved cherry jam and cover just with pecan halves and natural, dark, glacé cherries.

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