

Rustic Plum Cake - Serves 6

2 Tbs raspberry jam

3 Tbs Brandy

Cook this over medium heat in nonstick skillet 2-3 minutes. Remove from heat then add:

1 lb plums sliced in half and pit removed, cut side down.

Return skillet to medium heat and cook til plums release liquid about 5 mins.

Some Sad Night in East Texas, December 2021

You get a knock on the door. Sarah, your across-the-street neighbor, is holding a ceramic plate with freshly baked goodness from her mom. A cake with five or six plum halves nestled into it, dusted with a breath of confectioners' sugar, is still steaming in the cold. You thank her profusely and bring it inside to show your mom. A treat delivered just when you need it-- not a second too late.

Grease and flour a 9-inch springform pan. Preheat oven to 350, rack in the middle. In a food processor, add: 1/3 c almond flour or slivered almonds, 3/4 c sugar. Grind for 1 minute then add:

You and your mom dig in, indulging in the nutty, sweet, tart flavors all so perfectly paired in this one little cake. You share a look of wide-eyed awe: incredible. This is no ordinary neighborly baked good. This was the work of Jessica, the math professor and kitchen genius. Over the 13 years they've lived across the street, they have blessed your family with a range of truly delightful creations: pecan pie, Korean seafood soup, and furikake popcorn. But the plum cake is the only one you will dare to replicate.

3/4 c flour, 1/2 tsp baking powder, 1/4 tsp salt. Pulse 4-5 times then add:

6 Tbs softened unsalted butter (not butter; we're making it without dairy) or margarine or vegetable oil. Pulse 10 times then add:

Earlier that night, you sit with your mom working out a predicament: the Christmas cookie exchange taking place in your English class the next day. During lockdown, you were diagnosed with a dairy allergy. While you've adjusted to navigating the dietary restriction in isolation, now,

you have returned to school. You're realizing that socialization brings all sorts of food-related activities, many of which will exclude you. It's hardly your greatest challenge at a time, but that night it consumes you.

1 large egg plus 1 yolk (eggs are not dairy)

1 tsp vanilla extract and 1/4 tsp almond extract

Pour batter into springform pan. Top with plums, skin side down and drizzle any remaining syrup. Place in oven and bake 40 -50 mins (toothpick clean). Dust with confectioners' sugar!

Jessica's cake, lovingly crafted for you with your new allergy in mind, does not last until the next morning. It doesn't even last until your dad comes home from work. The worries of the cookie exchange fade away with each bite, and your mind is made up: you will not participate, and you will be okay. The idea of being excluded from this and future activities, weighs on your heart, but with the generous and delectable plum cake nestled deep in your stomach, you've never felt so included.

A Warm Sunny Day, July 2023

"Are those plums?" you think, looking at the trees near your dorm. You'd never been much of a plum-eater--they're not particularly suited to the humid climate of your Texas hometown-- but their sight instantly returns you to your porch in December 2021, when Sarah passed over her mom's cake and wished you a good night. You text your dad, download plant-identifier apps, and consult Forager Facebook groups trying to identify this tree. The craving for plum cake has overcome you and will not be ignored. You message Jessica to request the recipe, now determined to make it yourself.

Recipes with Jessica: Rustic Plum Cake

2 Tbs raspberry jam, 3 Tbs Brandy or 1 Tbs vanilla extract (alcohol burns off 🍷)

By the time you resolve to make the recipe, the trees have dropped their fruit, so you enlist a coworker with a car to bring plums to campus. You bake it together, making do with no jam, no

food processor, and limited baking supplies that you gathered at the thrift store and brought back on the bus.

2 Tbs(ish) of random frozen berries you have in your freezer, sprinkle of sugar, 1 Tbs vanilla extract. Cook this over medium heat in nonstick skillet 2-3 minutes. Remove from heat then add:

4 plums sliced in half and pit removed, cut side down. Return skillet to medium heat and cook until it looks kinda jammy.

Grease and flour medium springform pan. Preheat oven to 350, rack in the middle.

In a bowl, add: 1/3 c almond flour and 3/4 c sugar.

Mix for 1 minute then add: 3/4 c flour, 1/2 tsp baking powder, 1/4 tsp salt.

Mix until smooth then add: 6 Tbs vegetable oil, 1 large egg plus 1 yolk, 1 tsp vanilla extract

Mix until the texture is between a sugar cookie and a cake batter.

Pour batter into the springform pan. Top with plums, skin side down and drizzle any remaining syrup. Place in oven and bake for 40 -50 mins (toothpick clean). Dust with confectioners' sugar!

Success! Despite the adaptations, the cake comes out just as you remember it. You send a picture to your dear old neighbor Jessica and thank her once again for the cake that managed to absolve the loneliness of a cookie exchange with one generous and delicious act.

A Sunday Afternoon in Salt Lake City, January 2024

Your dear friend, B, is coming to cook dinner with you in your shared dorm kitchen. On the menu is a chickpea stew and the plum cake, but this time with pears to accommodate in-season produce. All the baggage of winter break that's been sitting on you: family dynamics, loneliness, big thoughts for a bigger world... all lift and float away in the smells of ginger, onions, turmeric, red chili flakes, chickpeas, and chatter between two friends. As you eat the chickpeas together, an idea dawns on her: we should add the leftover ginger to the pears when stewing them to make the cake. And in that moment, the ginger pear cake is born.

Sprinkle of sugar, maybe some honey if you have

Splash of water ("not too much", B says, "I know how you like to add water to things...")

1 Tbs vanilla extract

One thumb's length of sliced up (and peeled) ginger

Cook this over medium heat in nonstick skillet 2-3 minutes. Remove from heat then add:

2-3 pears sliced in pieces and core removed (if you have extra stewed pears, just eat them!)

Return skillet to medium heat and cook until the juices of the pears and the ginger are one.

Scatterings of residents pass through the dorm kitchen. You don't pay them any mind.

Grease and flour a medium-sized springform pan. Preheat oven to 350, rack in the middle. In a bowl, add:

1/3 c almond flour and 3/4 c sugar

Mix for 1 minute then add: 3/4 c flour, 1/2 tsp baking powder, 1/4 tsp salt

Mix until smooth then add: 6 Tbs vegetable oil, 1 large egg plus 1 yolk, 1 tsp vanilla extract

Mix until the texture is between a sugar cookie and cake batter.

Pour batter into springform pan. Top with plums, skin side down and drizzle any remaining syrup. Place in oven and bake 40 -50 mins (toothpick clean). Dust with confectioners sugar!

The cake comes out of the oven and is stunning. The aroma is nothing like you've ever made

before and perfectly seasonal for the cold, wintery night. The two of you chat together in your dorm room for many hours with no regard for time or the schedule of the last bus. The late-night journey home is far from enticing, and B ends up cozying up on your carpet, as she so often will throughout the years to come.

Memorial Day Weekend in Texas, May 2024

Your whole family is headed to a beach house, except for you. You are staying one night before being dropped off at the airport tomorrow morning to travel to Amman, Jordan as part of a university program you have sought out to learn Arabic. Before you go, you want to leave your four sisters, three nieces and nephews, two parents, and various in-laws with a few parting gifts in the form of cakes. This time, you decide to make one peach cake, one plum cake, and one strawberry cake (not as good as the stone fruits or the pear and never to be repeated). In the haste of baking three cakes before a two-hour road trip and 20-hour plane trip, you drop one of the pans fresh out of the oven on your left arm. The scar is still visible years later, but instead of reminding you of the pain of the hot metal, it is a branding of this cake, and a memory of the

many environments and many times you have baked it.

In Amman that summer, you eat the most delicious plums, peaches, and apricots of your life, and can't help but imagine the cakes you would make. Somehow, you had never tasted a fresh apricot before now, at twenty years old. If only your host mother would let you use the kitchen, if only you had time between hours of classes and Arabic homework and excursions, and if only you knew where to buy almond flour in this city... You return home with new confidence in yourself, rudimentary Arabic skills, and a longing to one day return to Jordan to fulfill the dream of an Ammani fruit cake.

The Last Day of Summer, September 2024

Rustic Plum Cake - A Recipe for Falling in Love with Your Dear Friend

2 Tbs of deciding something has to change. You're still in love with her despite your best efforts.

3 Tbs of wanting to celebrate the last day of summer with plum cake.

Cook this over medium heat in a nonstick skillet for 2-3 minutes. Remove from heat then add:

1 lb of an enormously busy schedule

Return skillet to medium heat and cook til plums release liquid about 5 mins.

A week after telling her you still have feelings for her, preheat oven to 350, rack in the middle. In a food processor, add:

1/3 c of stumbling on a park with a view of the entire valley

3/4 c of deleting all dating app accounts

Mix for 1 minute then add:

3/4 c courage

1/4 tsp women singing in the park as you watch the sunset together

Pulse 4-5 times then add:

6 Tbs of her arm around you

Pulse 10 times then add:

1 deep breath plus 1 inch closer

1 tsp anxiety silencing you (a rarity)

1/4 tsp of overpriced vegan diner food (optional)

Pour batter into springform pan. Top with plums, skin side down and drizzle any remaining syrup. Place in oven and bake 40-50 mins (toothpick clean). Dust with confectioners sugar (you always forget the confectioners sugar)!

Fall in Amman with Your Dear Friend Who Has Become the Love of Your Life, October 2025

"Let's go to the produce market and see what looks good for the cake!" you say. Overwhelming and overstimulating, this is your favorite place in Amman. B has transported almond flour across the world to visit you during another summer abroad, and your dream of making the signature cake with Jordanian produce is coming to fruition. The stalls are full of figs, cruciferous vegetables, oranges, and the very beginnings of persimmons. It's fall, and there are not many plums, apricots, or peaches to be found. "Bidee ruba'a kilo low samaht! [I'd like a quarter kilo, please]" you say to the seller at the fig stand. He gives you and your girlfriend each a fig to taste before you make the purchase. Returning home to bake, it is just past the anniversary of the two of you falling in love over this same recipe.

You make the cake together: you stew the figs, while she retrieves the batter left in the fridge overnight. It's your first time using your oven in this apartment, so your downstairs neighbor comes to help you turn the gas knob and ignite it with a lighter. The cake, inevitably, does not come out quite right. The oven is too hot, and the batter is too cold, so the edges burn while leaving a raw inside. This, of course, doesn't matter to either of you. She comes up to the roof with you, and you share the cake overlooking the city. In just a few hours, she will head to the airport, and you will finish the rest of the year thousands of miles apart. You are with the person you love, in a city you have grown to love, eating a cake that you have always loved. This is all you could ever need.

Three more cakes come out of your oven before you leave Amman, all but using up your imported almond flour: Another plum cake (your downstairs neighbor says it's the best dessert

she's had all year), persimmon ginger cake (a treat for your new roommate's birthday party), and passion fruit cake (to commemorate your second to last night in Amman, using the passion fruits your roommate got from her volunteering job).

The recipe is muscle memory now. You can stew the fruit, mix the batter, and have it in the oven in twenty minutes. It is a graduation gift, a wedding shower present, and your anniversary tradition. You make this cake and remember the neighbor you have not seen in four years, the coworker you first made it with who you no longer speak to, your life-partner who was once just the friend in your dorm getting ideas to mix ginger with the pears, and the scar on your arm that has mostly faded but is still visible. You remember the people, memories, houses, dorms, apartments, and even countries that this cake has seen.

Suddenly, your whole adult life can be traced in the cakes you have made. Although the fruit selection and people you share it with change through seasons, the joy of sharing remains. You can track the last five years in memories of plum cake, pear cake, cherry cake, peach cake, plum cake, pear cake, peach cake, plum cake, cherry cake, plum cake, peach cake, fig cake, plum cake, persimmon cake, passionfruit cake, pear cake, remembering where you were and who you shared it with. And always, always, remembering the first cake; the offering of generosity that has shaped your desires to bake goodness, and the foundation of your belief in all that is meant to be shared.

Rustic Whatever-The-Fruit-You-Want Cake

Serves 2-20 people, just keep doubling or tripling it.

Works Cited:

Matthews, Harry. "Country Cooking from Central France: Roast Boned Rolled Stuffed Shoulder of Lamb (Farce Double)." *The Next American Essay*, Graywolf Press, St. Paul, Minnesota, 2003, pp. 81–93.

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