

Carrot Cake

In this corner, the all-American favorite, and in that corner, a fanciful carrot-topped wonder. It's going to be one delicious smackdown.

BY ABIGAIL JOHNSON DODGE AND JEHANGIR MEHTA

the classic....



Back Story

Carrot cake came onto the American cookbook scene in 1929 in *The Twentieth Century Bride's Cookbook*.



Top It Off

For a match made in heaven, cream cheese frosting was married with carrot cake in the 1960s.



Usual Suspects

This cake is chock full of shredded carrots, chopped walnuts, and raisins, plus all the expected spices (think cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, and cloves).



Health Food?

With chopped nuts, dried fruit, and Vitamin A-rich carrots in the mix, is carrot cake good for you? Not if you figure in the sugar, oil, and cream cheese frosting.



EVERYONE LOVES CARROT CAKE. We like it so much we decided to track down the best-ever classic version and the most innovative variation we'd come across, and do a little comparison tasting. Abby Dodge, *Fine Cooking* contributing editor and baker extraordinaire, gave us the ultimate recipe for the classic (she got it from her mother). Jehangir Mehta, pastry chef and owner of Graffiti, a food and wine bar in New York City, created an inspired update. Let the bake-off begin.

....the update



Carrot Top

Spiced candied carrot ribbons add a cool look and exciting texture.



Think Again

No shredded carrots or walnuts here. A sweet carrot juice reduction flavors these little cakes, and a pistachio garnish brings color and crunch to the party.



Got Sugar?

During lean times, bakers sweetened desserts with carrots instead of costly sugar. In a nod to the past, our update uses much less sugar.



Double Duty

After candying carrots in a sweet syrup for the topping, the cakes are dunked into the syrup for an extra dose of carrot goodness.





classic carrot cake with vanilla cream cheese frosting

The flavors of this moist cake only improve with time, so feel free to bake and frost the cake up to a few days ahead.

Yields one 9-inch layer cake;

Serves 12 to 14

FOR THE CAKE

- 1 cup canola, corn, or vegetable oil; more for the pans
- 2 cups (9 oz.) unbleached all-purpose flour; more for the pans
- 2 tsp. ground cinnamon
- 1¾ tsp. baking soda
- ¾ tsp. ground nutmeg
- ¾ tsp. ground ginger
- ¾ tsp. table salt
- 4 large eggs
- 2½ cups (8¾ oz.) lightly packed, finely grated carrots
- 2 cups packed light brown sugar
- ¾ cup chopped walnuts, toasted
- ½ cup raisins
- 1½ tsp. pure vanilla extract

FOR THE FROSTING

- 1 lb. cream cheese, softened
- 12 oz. (1½ cups) unsalted butter, softened
- 1 lb. (4 cups) confectioners' sugar
- 4 tsp. pure vanilla extract
- ¾ tsp. table salt

MAKE THE CAKE

Position a rack in the center of the oven and heat the oven to 350°F. Lightly oil and flour the sides of two 9x2-inch round cake pans, tapping out any excess flour. Line the bottoms of the pans with parchment.

In a medium bowl, whisk the flour, cinnamon, baking soda, nutmeg, ginger, and salt. In a large bowl with a hand mixer or in a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, mix the oil, eggs, carrots, brown sugar, walnuts, raisins, and vanilla on medium speed until well blended, about 1 minute. Add the dry ingredients and mix on low speed until just blended, about 30 seconds. Divide the batter evenly between the prepared pans.

Bake until the tops of the cakes spring back when lightly pressed and a cake tester inserted into the centers comes out clean, 28 to 30 minutes.

Let cool in the pans on a rack for 15 minutes. Run a knife around the inside edge of the pans to loosen the cakes, invert them onto the rack, remove the pans, and carefully peel away the parchment. Set the cakes aside to cool completely before frosting.

MAKE THE FROSTING

In a large bowl, beat the cream cheese and butter with the mixer on medium speed until very smooth and creamy, about 1 minute. Add the confectioners' sugar, vanilla, and salt and beat on medium high until blended and fluffy, about 2 minutes. Cover the frosting and set aside at room temperature until the layers are completely cool.

ASSEMBLE THE CAKE

Carefully set one cake upside down on a large, flat serving plate. Using a metal spatula, evenly spread about 1½ cups of the frosting over the top of the cake. Top with the remaining cake layer, upside down. Spread a thin layer (about ⅓ cup) of frosting over the entire cake to seal in any crumbs and fill in any gaps between layers. Refrigerate until the frosting is cold and firm, about 20 minutes. Spread the entire cake with the remaining frosting. For more tips on how to frost a layer cake, see Test Kitchen, page 83.

Refrigerate the cake for at least 4 hours or up to 2 days. The cake is best served slightly chilled or at room temperature.

I'm all for change when necessary, but don't mess with my mom's carrot cake. It's perfect just the way it is.

—ABBY DODGE



People's tastes have changed—sugar is out and spices are in. That's change we can believe in.

—JEHANGIR MEHTA

spiced carrot cakes with candied carrots and pistachios

Candied carrots and a finer crumb set this variation apart from traditional carrot cake.

Serves 8

FOR THE CAKES

- 2 cups carrot juice
- 1 1-inch piece fresh ginger, peeled and finely grated
- 3 oz. (6 Tbs.) unsalted butter, softened; more for the molds
- 6¼ oz. (1 ½ cups) unbleached all-purpose flour; more for the molds
- 1½ tsp. ground allspice
- 1 tsp. ground cinnamon
- ½ tsp. ground star anise
- ½ tsp. baking soda
- ¼ tsp. table salt
- ¼ cup packed light brown sugar
- 2 large eggs
- ¼ cup chopped unsalted pistachios (for garnish)

FOR THE CANDIED CARROTS

- 2 cups granulated sugar
- 2 large carrots, peeled and cut into long julienne strands to yield 1 cup (see Test Kitchen, p. 83)
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 1 whole star anise

MAKE THE CAKES

Combine the carrot juice and ginger in a medium saucepan and bring to a boil over medium heat. Boil until reduced to ¾ cup, about 25 minutes. Let cool to room temperature.

Position a rack in the center of the oven and heat the oven to 325°F. Butter and flour 8 baba au rhum molds (2¼ to 2½ inches tall; see Where to Buy It, p. 92). Set aside on a large rimmed baking sheet.

In a medium bowl, whisk the flour, allspice, cinnamon, star anise, baking soda, and salt. In a large bowl with a hand mixer or in a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, cream the butter and brown sugar on medium speed until light and fluffy, 1 to 2 minutes. On medium-low speed, add one of the eggs, mix until mostly blended, and then add the second egg. On low speed, alternate adding the flour mixture and the carrot reduction in two additions each. Mix each addition until just combined.

Spoon the batter into the prepared molds, filling each a little more than half full. Swirl the batter with a skewer to smooth the tops. Bake the cakes until a cake tester inserted into the centers comes out clean, 20 to 22 minutes.

Cool the cakes on a rack for 10 minutes and then carefully invert to remove from the molds. Cool the cakes upright on the rack. The cakes may be served warm or at room temperature.

MAKE THE CANDIED CARROTS

Bring the sugar and 2 cups of water to a boil in a medium saucepan over high heat. Add the carrots, cinnamon stick, and star anise. Reduce the heat to maintain a simmer; simmer gently, stirring occasionally, until the carrots are translucent, soft, and slightly sticky to the touch, about 30 minutes. Discard the cinnamon and star anise. Remove the carrots

with a slotted spoon and set aside. Reserve the syrup.

To serve, dip each cake in the syrup for about 3 seconds, put it on a dessert plate, and drizzle with about 1 tsp. syrup. Garnish with the candied carrots and pistachios.

Make ahead: You can make the cakes up to 1 day ahead and the candied carrots up to 2 hours ahead.

Abby Dodge lives in Southport, Connecticut, and Jehangir Mehta, in New York City. ■

