



Slices

to dream on

OLD
AMERICAN
TRADITIONS
OF
WEDDING
CAKES

In the dim confines of a frontier cabin, a 16-year-old girl works by the flame and soot of a wood-burning stove. It's the middle of the day, but with its single window not much wider than a book, the cabin is so dark she can hardly see. For once she doesn't mind. Today she is making her own wedding cake. Her fingers fly as she unwraps neat paper packages and breathes in their luscious contents: almonds, candied orange and sugar as white as hotel linen. All imported and highly priced, all necessary for the occasion. Firelight touches the orange, making it glow like stained glass. The work takes hours—whipping two dozen egg whites with a wooden spoon, working sugar into cold butter, folding it all with flour and mace. She is tired as she pours the mix into a wooden hoop. Then she pauses for the crowning touch. **Retrieving a cheap metal ring from her pocket, she drops it in the batter, notching the hoop to mark where it fell and closing it all in the oven. Two weeks later, it's her wedding day.** The ceremony is over; the meal has begun, and it's time for the ring to come out. The new bride stands by the table in her good black dress as her mother cuts the cake. It's one layer—not much to look at—and there is little ceremony to the cutting. But the guests and neighbors hover, anxiously awaiting a slice. When her best friend, still unmarried, approaches, the bride's hands signal to the slice marked secretly by the notch. Her mother doesn't notice the gesture and dishes the slice to a 6-year-old boy. It takes him only a second to discover the ring. He marches about, singing that he is the next to be engaged. The adults roar with delight as the bride's friend blushes.

THIS STORY COULD HAVE HAPPENED ON ANY American frontier—Ohio in 1790, Minnesota in 1820 or Alaska in 1902. The game of hiding a ring in a wedding cake was like tossing a bouquet today. If it sounds odd now, it's probably because current wedding practice seems so timeless: A bride in a white dress, queen for a day, makes that ceremonial first cut of a three-tiered tower of white frosting.

It can be distressing, or liberating, to learn that this familiar scene is not so timeless or American after all. The white wedding style clearly began with British royal weddings in the mid-1800s, says wedding historian Elizabeth Freeman, professor at the University of California–Davis and author of *The Wedding Complex* (Duke University Press, 2002). Americans copied and mass-produced the idea.

But English Victorians did not invent wedding cake—only one style of it. Early Americans had their own wedding cake recipes and rituals. Their cakes didn't look or taste like ours. In fact, some hardly seemed to be cake at all.

"Pioneers grew happy while celebrating the wedding with song, dance and feast, rendered exquisitely delightful by the introduction of the wedding 'pound cake,'" reads one 1782 account of a Tennessee wedding. That cake was made from cornmeal, water and salt—nothing else. The settlers had not eaten grain in months.

"What was most important was to have some sort of baked good that could be broken," says Wendy Woloson, author of *Refined Tastes: Sugar, Confectionary, and Consumers in 19th-century America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). For settlers of European origin, baked goods had deep symbolic roots. Grain was a Roman symbol of fertility and sustenance, and breaking bread echoed Christian sacrament.

When scarcity did not rule, the earliest American wedding cakes followed cultural lines, Woloson suggests. German pastry had a tradition of extravagant piping and ornament, whereas English settlers preferred fruitcake.

Though these influences probably merged over time, fruitcake dominated book and magazine recipes throughout the 1800s. The ideal fruitcake was rich with a dozen eggs and 4 pounds of fruit for every pound of flour. The "bride cake," as wedding cake was often called, consisted of a dense, alcoholic mass vivid with brandy and mace.

Cakes could also be astoundingly expensive, since for decades ingredients like dried fruit and sugar were imported. Such a cake might be unattainable for a poor or country bride, but she would not go without cake altogether. Her bride's cake might be a white cake or a humbler fruitcake with less fruit and more flour, and neighbors and friends might bring other treats to round out the feast.

Even "lighter" fruitcake was deluxe. (See sidebar for a recipe.) No one made jokes about using it as a doorstep or boat anchor. People craved it. Boxed slices were served as favors for wedding guests, and newspaper editors prodded newlyweds to send some in exchange for printing their marriage announcements.

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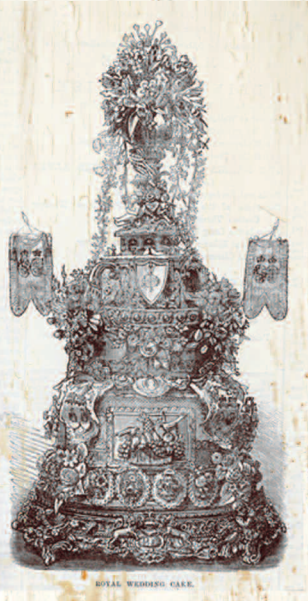
FRUITCAKE KEPT WELL, ESPECIALLY SINCE almonds, alcohol and sugar are all preservatives, notes Peg Alter, instructor of Patisserie & Baking at the Western Culinary Institute in Portland, Ore. People stored wedding cake for months, years and occasionally decades, with the full expectation that it could be brought out and eaten on special occasions or with an honored guest.

Occasionally, fruitcake served as emergency food. According to an 1864 article in the *New York Times*, when a train was trapped in a snowstorm, conductors confiscated stored wedding cake for desperate passengers. When explorer Elisha Kent Kane's ship was trapped in the Arctic in 1854, he sent a dogsled team over the ice for help, using his brother's wedding cake for rations.

"They pulled the sled they were harnessed to famously," Kane wrote.

Still, the most important kind of sustenance wedding cake provided was emotional. For a century, it was a literary symbol of yearning for, and winning, love. Writers were most inspired by the way eligible girls put slices under their pillows to bring dreams of future husbands. This gave poets grist for thousands of ballads addressed to young women, such as the following rhyme in a 1775 issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*.

"SWEET NYMPHS, ACCEPT THE MAGIC BREAD,
PREPARE FOR DREAMS THE DOWNY BED
OH! MAY IT BRING IN GAY ATTIRE
THOSE YOUTHS WHO FEEL THE SACRED FIRE
WHICH CHARMS LIKE YOURS CAN ONLY RAISE
AND HEARTS LIKE THEIRS CAN JUSTLY PRAISE."



EARLY AMERICAN WEDDING CAKE WAS usually homemade, and it had homespun charm. It took Queen Victoria and her descendants to change that. A series of noble weddings from 1840 to 1888 unveiled cakes of unprecedented architectural complexity, described in Woloson's book and in Simon Charsley's *Wedding Cakes and Cultural History* (Routledge, 1992). Princess Louise's cake was five feet high and formed like a temple, with three tiers connected by arches, columns and "allegorical figures of Agriculture, Fine Arts, Science, and Commerce."

These British ceremonies transformed weddings in America. In fits and starts from 1850 to 1920, wedding dresses turned white, and wedding cake recipes in magazines shifted from dark, heavy, single-layered, mace-flavored to white, light, tiered, vanilla- or lemon-flavored confections. Where fruitcake remained, it was increasingly called "groom's cake."

A 1922 piece in *Ladies Home Journal* showed how much things had changed, encouraging readers with "deft fingers" to attempt to create a wedding cake—something a woman 100 years before would not have hesitated to do. By then, wedding cake had become a monument for professionals to construct.

Though the Victorian style still dominates today (the majority of cakes are light-colored, light-textured, three-tiered structures), a rebellion against traditional cakes may be gaining ground. The bulletin boards of Internet sites like Indiebride.com show a hotbed of impatience with standard wedding cakes, particularly because of their expense, quality and association with rituals like smashing cake in a spouse's face.

Indiebride.com contributors sound a lot more like frontier brides than contemporary ones. After taste tests of commercial cakes proved disappointing, one Seattle bride-to-be and her fiancé had a revelation.

"We realized no one would make a cake as good as ours," she writes.

The couple plans to make their own cake—which might be the most American wedding tradition of all.

A freelance writer in Portland, Ore., Martin John Brown's last piece for American Spirit was the May/June 2005 article on horse racing in early America.





A BRIDE'S CAKE IN ECONOMY MODE Interested in trying recipes used for wedding cakes 200 years ago? Old recipes are available, but aren't easy to follow. Besides the temptation to sip brandy or rum (essential ingredients before 1850), the cookware is strange (hoops instead of pans), and the instructions assume you have lots of time. "Beat it well for three hours," instructed Richard Briggs in his icing recipe in the 1792 tome *The New Art of Cookery According to the Present Practice*. Reproducing such recipes precisely is impractical. The following recipe reworks Briggs' Bride Cake for today's kitchen. The quantities in Briggs' original text are so obscure the recipe can describe two historically accurate kinds of wedding cake. One reading creates a fantastically sweet, expensive mass of brandied fruit. Another makes the product more economical—and perhaps more realistic for a modest bride—but remains rich and unique. The economical version is presented here and is recommended. Variations necessary for the "heavy" version appear in parentheses, but watch out—it might not agree with modern palates.

BRIDE CAKE

1 lb. butter
 1 1/4 cup white sugar
 2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
 1/2 teaspoon mace
 1/2 teaspoon nutmeg
 8 eggs, separated
 2 1/2 cups dried currants (8 cups)
 1/2 cup almonds, slivered (2 cups)
 1/2 cup candied citron (2 cups)
 1/2 cup candied orange peel (2 cups)
 1/2 cup candied lemon peel (2 cups)
 1/4 cup brandy (1 cup)

*Updated and tested by Dave & Deanna
 Haugaard and Larissa Brown*

1. Preheat oven to 300 F.
2. Pour brandy over currants and set aside.
3. Butter and flour a 9" spring-form pan (larger for "heavy" version). Tap out excess flour. Line pan with parchment paper.
4. Sift together flour, mace and nutmeg and set aside.
5. With electric mixer, beat egg whites until peaks form. Set aside.
6. With mixer and clean bowl, beat egg yolks until frothy. Set aside separately from whites.
7. In another clean bowl, cream butter on medium speed until soft. Add sugar and beat until well combined.
8. Beating at low speed, gradually add egg whites, then yolks.
9. Beating on low, gradually add dry flour mixture.
10. Continuing on low, add currants and brandy, then almonds.
11. Pour 1/4 of cake mixture into the pan. Spread candied citron over the cake mixture. Add another layer of cake mixture, then orange peel, then another layer of cake mixture, then lemon peel. Complete layering with final 1/4 of cake mixture, and smooth with spatula.
12. Bake for 2 hours, or until top is golden brown (longer for "heavy" version).
13. If desired, ice with royal icing (recipe in many standard cookbooks) flavored with rose water.
14. Store in container to preserve moisture. Flavor should mellow with age.