The Gentle Rise of (Real) Cake

An heirloom collection of beat-up baking pans is propped against the back shelving of the open cabinets in my kitchen. Some are imprinted with brand names, such as Calumet (“The World’s Greatest Baking Powder Double Acting—Makes Baking Easier”), and others are nameless. I imagine the silky-smooth batters that a progression of home cooks poured into them, which baked up into handsome, fine-grained cakes. Real cake.

Gently springy, with a melting texture defined by careful measuring and mixing. Turned out of the pans, those buttery, satiny layers offered honest flavor, lingering on cooling racks just long enough before becoming obscured by waves of frosting.

If the recipes from generations of bakers in my family are a valid reference, these cakes consisted of a pivotal ingredient, namely cake flour. In 1896 a certain Addison Igleheart developed and manufactured Swan’s Down Cake Flour, and in 1928 he published a booklet to emphasize the product’s potential appeal. Entitled Cake Secrets, this slender work offered, for ten cents, a taxonomy of cake in all of its basic forms (including tips on cake making and my favorite recipe title, Regulation Butter Cakes). The following sentence appears at the end of the booklet, and it could very well be the mission statement for my own baking ethos: “Cake is not really cake unless it is light, tender, moist, of even-grained texture, and delicate flavor.”

Whenever I think of cake, a classic butter cake comes to mind. Not the now-fashionable type of “cake” that flows onto the dessert plate when a fork breaks through it. This alleged cake presents my most beloved flavor, chocolate, in its basic forms (including tips on cake making and my favorite recipe title, Regulation Butter Cakes). The following sentence appears at the end of the booklet, and it could very well be the mission statement for my own baking ethos: “Cake is not really cake unless it is light, tender, moist, of even-grained texture, and delicate flavor.”

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The 1-2-3-4 cake—impressive for its delicacy—is my dictionary definition of real butter cake. Feathery and moist, the batter, which rises gently but purposefully, can be baked in a rectangular pan for a sheet cake or in several layer-cake pans. It forms just the right support for frosting, preferably thick, preferably confectioners’ sugar based. (Be advised: a fancy French butter cream would be lost in this setting.)

One of the recipes I inherited for the cake calls for 3 cups sifted cake flour, 2 cups fine sugar (superfine in today’s baking language), 4 eggs, and 1 cup milk. This rundown accounts for all of the numbers in the title. The batter is put together in the traditional way, by creaming the butter until pearly and softened, incorporating the sugar by degrees and beating well after each addition, adding the whole eggs or yolks alone, and integrating the flour, sifted with baking powder and salt, alternately with the milk. If the eggs are separated, the whites are folded into the batter at the end of the mixing process. An indulgent pour of vanilla extract, along with the butter, becomes the primary flavoring agent. What you spoon from the mixing bowl is a luminous mixture, buoyant as can be, already revealing in its unbaked form the guarantee of something fine grained and light.

When I want to recall the past in a sentimental way, realign myself after cooking some pretty complicated things, or please a band of sweet-starved friends, I take out a set of mismatched cake pans belonging to my late mother or a rectangular baking pan that’s worn from my own life’s work of baking. (Both boast slick interior patinas that only time and a particular amount of babying can guarantee.) I assemble the ingredients for the vanilla cake, leaving the butter to soften and the milk and eggs to ease out of their chilled state and then put together the batter. It spoons into the pan in cloudlike swells. I smooth over the top with a few quick strokes of a spatula. The individual layers that emerge from the oven are like soft, springy pillows, the sheet cake a nice plump cushion. I wait— impatiently—for the layers to cool in order to swirl a frosting between and about the individual layers or over the surface of the sheet cake.

Drawn to the barely set elements of cake and frosting, I then commit an act that is anathema to what I instruct (read: preach) in my baking recipes: “Let the cake stand for one hour before slicing and serving.” Cake as authentic as this entices with its texture and teases all those tasty emotions that lurk within. My childlike impulses surface, and I cut a still-warm slice.
Essence of Vanilla Cake with Chocolate Frosting

Variations of this cake abound, using all-purpose flour or cake flour, fluctuating amounts of baking powder, salt, and vanilla extract, and eggs in whole or separated form. This version is designed for baking in one large single layer. It profits texturally from folding in beaten egg whites and reducing the baking powder from the typical 1-tablespoon amount. For the silkiest weave to the internal crumb of the cake, be sure to use the freshest baking powder, beat the egg whites until just firm rather than rigid, and take care not to overbake the cake. The frosting is creamy and softly accented with chocolate, appealing to both children and adults. For a more complex chocolate flavor, omit the bitter-sweet chocolate and use 6 ounces unsweetened chocolate.

INGREDIENTS
Softened unsalted butter and all-purpose flour, for the baking pan

Vanilla Cake Batter
3 cups sifted cake flour
2 ¼ teaspoons baking powder
½ teaspoon salt, preferably very-fine sea salt
½ pound (16 tablespoons or 2 sticks) unsalted butter, softened
2 cups superfine sugar
Seeds from 1 plump vanilla bean, cut lengthwise and scraped clean
4 large eggs, separated
1 cup milk
2 ¼ teaspoons vanilla extract
½ teaspoon cream of tartar

Luxurious Chocolate Frosting
12 tablespoons (1 ½ sticks) unsalted butter, softened
large pinch of salt, preferably very-fine sea salt
4 ounces unsweetened chocolate, melted and cooled to tepid
2 ounces bittersweet chocolate, melted and cooled to tepid
4 cups confectioners’ sugar, plus more as needed
½ cup heavy cream combined with 2 tablespoons milk, warmed to tepid
3 teaspoons vanilla extract

For the cake batter preheat the oven to 350°F. Prepare a 13 x 9 x 2 inch baking pan by filming the inside with softened butter. Sprinkle a haze of flour over it and tap the pan from side to side to lightly coat the bottom and sides. Thoroughly tap out the excess flour and set the pan aside.

Resift the cake flour with the baking powder and salt onto a sheet of waxed paper.

Cream the butter in the large bowl of a freestanding electric mixer on moderate speed for 4 to 5 minutes. Add the sugar in 4 additions, beating for 1 minute after each portion is added. Mix in the vanilla bean seeds and 2 egg yolks, beat for 30 seconds, and then add the remaining yolks and beat for 20 seconds longer. Scrape down the sides of the mixing bowl with a rubber spatula to keep the batter even textured.

On low speed alternately add the sifted mixture in 3 additions with the milk in 2 additions, beginning and ending with the sifted mixture. Scrape down the sides of the mixing bowl often. Blend in the vanilla extract.

In a clean dry bowl beat the egg whites until just beginning to mound. Add the cream of tartar and beat until firm and moist (but not stiff) peaks are formed. Stir about one-quarter of the beaten whites into the cake batter and then fold through the remaining whites. Keep the mixture light, but do take care to engage any and all lumps of unbeaten whites into the batter.

Spoon the batter into the prepared baking pan, leveling it lightly to all sides and into the corners. Gingerly sweep over the top to even the surface. Do not linger over the batter any longer than it takes to fill the baking pan and smooth the batter.

Bake the cake in the preheated oven for 40 minutes, or until golden on top, risen, and a wooden pick inserted 1 to 2 inches from the center withdraws clean or with a few stray crumbs attached. Here and there the cake will pull away ever so slightly from the sides of the pan. Cool the cake in the pan on a rack.

For the frosting beat the butter in the large bowl of a freestanding electric mixer on moderate speed for 3 to 4 minutes. Blend in the melted unsweetened chocolate, melted bittersweet chocolate, and 2 cups of confectioners’ sugar. Blend in the heavy cream and milk mixture. (In cold, dry weather the frosting may require beating in an extra 1 or 2 tablespoons of milk to arrive at a creamy texture.) Scrape down the sides of the mixing bowl. Add the remaining 2 cups confectioners’ sugar and vanilla extract. Beat for 2 minutes on moderate speed to blend. Scrape down the sides of the mixing bowl. Beat on high speed for 3 to 5 minutes longer, or until quite smooth and creamy. (On a damp day or in a humid or warm kitchen, it may be necessary to beat in up to 6 more tablespoons of confectioners’ sugar to bind the frosting.) Use the frosting immediately. If the frosting stands for any length of time, it will turn spongy; to restore it add 2 additional tablespoons of confectioners’ sugar and rebeat slowly.

To frost the cake spoon dollops of frosting onto the surface and then spread it from side to side. Lightly swirl the frosting, using a flexible palette knife. Let the frosting firm up for 1 hour before cutting into squares for serving. Serve the cake very fresh.