

Smith Island Cake

The Origins of Smith Island Cake

Smith Island Cake is a confection that consists of many (usually ten) thin layers of cake separated by an equal number of layers of sweet icing.

Nobody is quite sure who first developed the concept of the Smith Island Cake, though it is believed to have been started as a variation on an English Torte. Frances Kitching, whose recipes comprise the island's official cookbook, is often given credit. An excerpt of an interview with Dave and Midge Patterson for the Crisfield – Smith Island Alliance newsletter has this to say about it:

“When we asked about the origin of the famous, multi-layered Smith Island Cakes, she (Kitching) responded, ‘Well, I don’t know who made the first one ... I could’ve very well been. I don’t know ... but my kids loved the icing as well as they did the cake ...’ So it seems that those fabulous, thin-layered cakes may well have evolve to satisfy the craving of children (and maybe a few grown-ups too!) for more of that sweet, tasty icing.”

The most popular icing flavor is chocolate, but many bakers have branched out and now specialize in such exotic flavors as banana, orange, and coconut. The cake is usually yellow, though some bakers prefer to make it with chocolate batter.

The cake is a favorite at family gatherings and social events on Smith Island. It has become such a part of the island's culture that the visitor center on Ewell features a display of cake pans used to make this special dessert – and a video of Mrs. Kitching assembling one of her masterpieces.

The cake found its way over to the mainland and is now available for sale at bakeries and restaurants in Crisfield.

Visitors to the area who are lucky enough to sample Smith Island Cake don't soon forget it. In fact, a popular souvenir of a trip to Somerset County is a copy of Mrs. Kitching's cookbook – which, of course, includes a recipe for the island's beloved cake.

Smith Island Ten-Layer Cake— Mrs. Kitching's Original Recipe

2 cups sugar
2 sticks unsalted butter, cut into chunks (1 cup)
5 eggs
3 cups flour
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 heaping teaspoon baking powder
1 cup evaporated milk
2 teaspoons vanilla
1/2 cup water

Cream together sugar and butter. Add eggs one at a time and beat until smooth. Sift together flour, salt, and baking powder. Mix into egg mixture one cup at a time. With mixer running, slowly pour in the evaporated milk, then the vanilla and water. Mix just until uniform.

Put three serving spoonfuls of batter in each of ten 9-inch lightly greased pans, using the back of the spoon to spread evenly. Bake three layers at a time on the middle rack of the oven at 350° for 8 minutes. A layer is done when you hold it near your ear and you don't hear it sizzle.

Start making the icing when the first layers go in the oven. Put the cake together as the layers are finished. Let layers cool a couple of minutes in the pans. Run a spatula around the edge of the pan and ease the layer out of the pan. Don't worry if it tears; no one will notice when the cake is finished. Use two and three serving spoonfuls of icing between each layer. Cover the top and sides of the cake with the rest of the icing. Push icing that runs onto the plate back onto the cake.

Chocolate Icing for Ten-Layer Cake

2 cups sugar
1 cup evaporated milk
5 ounces unsweetened chocolate
1 stick unsalted butter
1/2 to 1 teaspoon vanilla

Put sugar and evaporated milk in a medium pan. Cook and stir over medium-low heat until warm. Add chocolate and cook to melt. Add butter and melt. Cook over medium heat at a slow boil for 10 to 15 minutes. Stir occasionally. Add vanilla. Icing will be thin but thickens as it cools.

Sample List of Flavors

Chocolate
Chocolate Walnut
Chocolate Coconut
Chocolate Raspberry
Banana
Banana Walnut
Orange
Mandarin Orange
Pineapple
Pineapple Banana
Coconut
Pineapple Coconut
Wet Coconut
Peanut Butter
Peanut Butter Cup
Pumpkin Spice
Red Velvet
German Chocolate
Devil's Food
Lemon
Red Velvet
Carrot
Pumpkin Spice
Spice
Key Lime
Butterfinger®
Cookies'n'Cream®

In Season Only

Strawberry
Strawberry Banana
Peach
Fig (extra charge)
Pumpkin

Customize Your Cake

You can add nuts (usually black walnut or pecans), fruit (some only in season), candy bar pieces, jams or jellies to almost any cake depending on the baker. Some vendors already offer unusual combinations such as: Black and Red (devil's food and red velvet alternating layers), Checkered Cake, Neapolitan, and more. These delicious cakes freeze well either whole, in sections or by the slice.