

Madeira Cake

By Andrew Lewis

➔ Whenever I think of the word cake, the first image in my mind is a Madeira cake. It's my birthday cake of choice. It has a wonderful texture and a rich flavor that is hard to beat. In short, I love Madeira cake. It's easy to make, keeps well, and the recipe is simple enough that I don't have to look it up before I start making it. It's a light cake that you can make well in advance of a picnic or tea party, and it always seems to turn out well.



Ingredients

9 oz self-rising flour
6 oz soft butter or margarine
6 oz sugar
3 eggs
Milk (optional)

Directions

Step 1: Mix the butter and sugar together in a bowl with an electric beater. Don't be fooled into thinking that you need to use caster sugar; ordinary sugar will work perfectly.

Step 2: Continue beating the mixture and add 2 tablespoons of flour. Adding a small amount of flour now will help stop the mixture from separating when you add the eggs.

Step 3: Beat the eggs into the mixture. Only add one egg at a time, and keep an eye on the mixture to make sure it isn't separating. Add a little more flour to the mixture if necessary.

Step 4: Continue beating the mixture while you gradually add the flour. There is no need to sieve the flour; just remember not to add it too quickly. You can fold in any extra flavorings at this point. Vanilla or lemon zest are quite traditional additions, but you could also add coffee essence, chopped dates, walnuts, or even a splash of something alcoholic to the mixture. Madeira cake has a reputation for being difficult to get wrong, so culinary experiments are less likely to result in total failure.

Step 5: You can't guarantee the size of eggs, so take a look at your cake batter and decide if you need to add milk. Ideally, the mixture should be able to hold on the beater without falling off, but not be so stiff that it sticks to the beater when you wipe it.

Step 6: Pour the mixture into a greased and lined cake pan, and bake at 350° F for about 45 minutes, or until the top of the cake is golden brown. A good way to test whether a cake is cooked properly is to insert a metal skewer into the top. If the skewer comes out clean, then the cake is probably cooked.

Step 7: Remove the cake from the oven and allow it to cool for a few minutes before removing it from the tin. Let the cake cool completely on a wire rack.

If the top of your cake cracks open while cooking, it is usually a sign that you've added too much moisture to the mixture. This would be considered a failure by baking traditionalists, but I think that a home-baked cake looks more appealing this way.

Decorate the cake to suit your tastes, or leave it plain if you prefer. Serve a generous slice to your guests with hot tea or coffee. A Madeira cake will keep for several days without losing its flavor, which makes it ideal for birthdays and picnics. If you're feeling particularly decadent, split the cake in half and add a whipped cream and jam filling.