

Colonial Cornmeal Pound Cake

Time: 10 minutes to make the batter, 1 hour and 10 minutes to bake the cake

A quick perusal of colonial cookbook facsimiles such as *The Carolina Housewife* or *The Virginia Housewife* reveals that the housewives in question were not spartan or shy when it came to cake ingredients. Brandy, sherry, orange-flower water, and rose water were regularly added to cake batters already burdened with butter, eggs, and “new milk.” Indian meal (what we call cornmeal) might meet up with soft, new-crop pastry flour and a shower of freshly grated mace or nutmeg. Inevitably, when we read these old recipes, we become faint with hunger, and long to be seated in a beautiful parlour taking tea along with a slice or three of a superb, old-fashioned cake.

Now here is our chance—and yours. We have created—in the colonial tradition—a lush pound cake, moist and velvety with bolts of sweet creamed-corn flavor running through it. In Native-American corn cookery, orange blossom is one of the nuance aromas; orange-flower water potentiates the corn flavor in this cake. Sherry is another nod to the colonial tradition, and a few drops of vanilla come along to make the other ingredients comfortable. Baked with a “lining” of fine cornmeal and sugar, this cake’s crust is particularly winsome—richly flavored and delicately crisp.

If only we had a parlour.

Equipment Mise en Place

For this recipe you will need a 9 by 5-inch loaf pan, a fine tea strainer, a small bowl, a 2-cup liquid measuring cup, a medium mixing bowl, a stand mixer fitted with the flat-beater attachment, a rubber spatula, a small offset spatula, and a wire cooling rack.

Ingredients

8 ounces (1 cup) unsalted European-style butter, softened, plus additional for greasing the loaf pan

2.5 ounces Anson Mills Antebellum Fine or Coarse Yellow Cornmeal, plus 1 tablespoon for dusting the loaf pan

7 ounces (1 cup) superfine sugar, plus 1 tablespoon for dusting the loaf pan

7.5 ounces Anson Mills Fine Cloth-Bolted Pastry Flour

1 teaspoon baking powder

Scant 1/2 teaspoon fine sea salt

Cooking Notes

We baked versions of this cake using Anson Mills Antebellum Fine and Coarse Yellow Cornmeal. The results were not surprising: the cake made with the fine cornmeal had a finer texture; the cake made with the coarse cornmeal had bigger corn flavor. In other respects, they are interchangeable. You choose.

It is best if all the ingredients for this recipe are at room temperature—including the flour and cornmeal—before you make the batter.

4 large eggs, room temperature
3 tablespoons orange-flower water
2 tablespoons dry sherry
2 tablespoons whole milk, room temperature
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Directions

1. Adjust an oven rack to the lower-middle position and heat the oven to 325 degrees. Generously butter a 9 by 5-inch loaf pan. Sift the 1 tablespoon cornmeal through a fine tea strainer into a small bowl and discard the coarse particles in the strainer or return them to the bag of cornmeal. Add the 1 tablespoon sugar to the sifted cornmeal and stir to combine. Dust the buttered loaf pan with the cornmeal-sugar mixture, tilting to coat the bottom and sides, then knock out the excess. Set the pan aside
2. Turn the cornmeal, flour, baking powder, and salt into a medium mixing bowl and whisk to combine. Crack the eggs into a 2-cup liquid measuring cup. Add the orange-flower water, sherry, milk, and vanilla and beat lightly with a fork until combined.
3. Beat the butter in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the flat-beater attachment until light and fluffy, about 2 minutes. Scrape down the bowl with a rubber spatula. With the mixer running on medium-low speed, add the sugar, then increase the speed to medium-high and beat until the mixture is light and aerated, about 3 minutes, scraping down the bowl once or twice. With the mixer running on low speed, add the dry ingredients in 3 batches alternating with the egg mixture in 2 batches, beginning and ending with the dry ingredients and scraping down the bowl 2 or 3 times. When all of the ingredients have been incorporated, detach the bowl from the mixer and fold the batter lightly with the rubber spatula to ensure that no wet or dry pockets remain.
4. Scrape the batter into the prepared loaf pan and, using a small offset spatula, spread it to the sides and corners of the pan and smooth the surface. Bake, rotating the pan after about 35 minutes, until the cake is deep golden brown, nicely risen and a wooden skewer or toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean, about 1 hour and 10 minutes. Cool the cake in the pan on a wire rack for 5 minutes. Invert the cake onto the rack, then turn it right side up and cool the cake to room temperature.

Makes one 9 by 5-inch cake