CARROT CAKE CRAVING

The name carrot cake is self explanatory; it is a cake that has pieces of real carrots mixed into its batter. Most carrot cake recipes have a white cream cheese frosting, but there are lots of options and varieties out there.

Many food historians believe that carrot cake had its origins in carrot puddings eaten by Europeans during the Middle Ages. Sugar was expensive so early bakers used carrots because of their natural sweetness and high moisture content.

Carrot cakes first became available in restaurants in the US in the 1960's. It quickly gained popularity, and by the 1970's, Food Network listed carrot cake as one of the top five food fads.

A carrot cake is nicely spiced, ultra-moist, and may be packed with tons of extras like pineapple, coconut, raisins, and pecans. Carrot cake just isn't carrot cake without the pairing of luscious cream cheese frosting!

Homemade carrot cake is simple to make, with just a few steps. Since this is a carrot cake, let's take a moment to discuss how to prepare the star of the recipe – the carrots! Use peeled, grated carrots. The size of the carrots will depend on how many you use, but generally 2 medium carrots = 1 cup grated carrots.

To grate the carrots, use the small holes on a handheld box grater. If you prefer, you could also shred them in a food processor using a shredding disc. In order for the carrots to be suspended throughout the batter, they should be finely grated.

Do NOT use store-bought shredded/grated carrots. While a shortcut is tempting, these are too dry and hard, and will ruin the texture of the cake because they will not provide the desired moisture and texture that comes from using fresh shredded carrots.

Carrot cake is oil-based rather than butter-based. Using oil in cakes allows for greater retention of moisture than cakes made with butter or shortening.

Carrot cake is ultimately a spice cake. The flavors and scents of baking spices like ground cinnamon, ginger, and nutmeg should take center stage, so don't be shy. Open the containers and smell the spices to be sure they are still fresh.

Variations include everything from pineapple and coconut to pecans and raisins. Be consciencious about how many mix-ins you add. Using too many will take away from the flavor of the spices and can also compromise the structural integrity of a tender cake. If using nuts and coconut in your cake, roasting them before adding them to the batter will add a greater depth of flavor.

It is very important to not overmix the carrot cake batter. As the last ingredients are being added, turn your mixer to the slowest speed, or switch to handmixing using a spatula. If you overmix your cake, the texture will be tough.

Carrot cake is moist and will stick to the pan. I recommend greasing the pans, then lining with parchment paper, and then greasing and flouring the pans again before adding the batter.

Avoid cutting the cake into layers by dividing the batter between two pans. If you want a taller cake, divide the batter between three 8" pans, and layer the three finished cakes.

It is important to let your cakes cool completely before assembling and frosting. If the cakes are warm, the heat will melt the cream cheese frosting.

Sweet-and-tangy cream cheese frosting makes carrot cake irresistible. Elevate the frosting by grating the zest of one orange or lemen into the cream cheese frosting to add a zingy twist to your carrot cake. Another option is to make a brown butter cream cheese frosting.

Leftover cake should be stored in an airtight container (or wrapped tightly in plastic wrap) in the refrigerator for up to 5 days. Let the cake rest at room temperature a while before you serve it.

February 3 is National Carrot Cake Day. Today is a day that we get to eat our cake and vegetables in an unlikely yet winning combination!

(Sources: jamiegeller.com; www.kingarthurbaking.com; www.thekitchn.com thestayathomechef.com)