



DORY'S DIARY

DOROTHY SWART FLESHMAN

Memories and the rosy pink of nostalgia

No, it isn't like it used to be. It never will be again. Our memories are just that — memories. We can't bring them back in any permanent form because they are gone, never to return just as they were. Sometimes our hearts ache for those we have loved and things or places we have known, and then we move on. That is all part of life as we wonder why we can't hang onto them longer, appreciate the good things and times more. There isn't time in our world to hang on to the world we have known, forgetting the hurts, the chances we didn't take, the pitfalls we avoided. As we move on there is always a new goal, a beckoning that draws us forth to sample the new, the excitement of change.

Even the seasons change and we move with them exchanging snow for new green of grass, yet sigh above the lawnmower or watering can when the first pleasure of melting snow draws us forth to the newness of the changing season.

Again we grumble when cold wind and dropping temperatures mean replacing shorts and badminton rackets with sweaters and indoors by the fire.

Those of us who live in changing seasons know what to expect and yet sometimes wonder why we don't replace the cold or wet with dry sunny skies and shirtsleeve wear for every day.

We grumble but go about what comes next with the weather. We like the changing seasons.

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BETWEEN THE ROWS

WENDY SCHMIDT

Succulent sedums thrive here

One of the first plants I was given when I moved to Missouri was for many months a mystery plant to me. My friend brought me what she called a live-forever plant. It resembled a jade plant in a way, but was a lighter and brighter green in color. The pretty, mound-shaped plant was obviously a succulent. I set about planting it in a small bed that I have around an oak tree. The new plant grew well in the rocky, dry soil there and didn't need any attention. In the fall the plant produced beautiful pink flowers that aged to a darker tone and attracted numerous butterflies. I decided I had to find out what the real name was of this wonderful plant.

You've all probably guessed by now that my live-forever plant was a sedum. Also known as stonecrop, they are fleshy-leaved succulent plants that offer ground-hugging plants for rock gardens and ground cover plantings, and larger sorts for general garden beds. All of them provide good foliage contrast in perennial plantings, and bear tiny, star-shaped blossoms that are grouped together in a flat-topped cluster. The leaves are oval, rubbery in texture and usually have round-toothed or scalloped edges.

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Homemade Birthday Cakes



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Yellow cake for a birthday

COUPLE OF CAKES

By Daniel Neman
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

My father grew up during the Depression. His family was exceptionally poor, but even so they managed to celebrate special events.

A birthday meant a birthday cake from a bakery. But they couldn't afford to special-order a cake, so they instead would buy a mistake, a cake that someone else had ordered but had never picked up. My father used to joke that his cakes always said "Happy Birthday Marianne" on them.

Many years later, my mother thought it would be funny on his birthday to give him a cake reading "Happy Birthday Marianne." She asked a bakery to make one.

There are several ways to spell the name: Marianne, Maryann, Mary Ann, Mary Anne. The baker asked her how to spell it.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said my mother. You can imagine the look on the baker's face.

I mention this story because birthday cakes are inexplicably on my mind right now, and was especially to be on my mind on Saturday (I wear a 17/35 shirt, in case you're interested).

So even though I can't figure out why I've been thinking about making them — and don't tell me that age will do that to a person — I set out to make three birthday cakes this week.

One is a traditional cake, the very sort of cake that is most likely to say "Happy Birthday Marianne." One is a red velvet cake. And one is a carrot cake.

Why a carrot cake? Because it is the best cake I know how to make. It is also the best cake I know how to eat. It is the best cake you will ever have. Everyone should try this carrot cake at least once in their lives.

It is, I can say with no fear of contradiction, the best carrot cake in the world. It was developed by the geniuses at the long-closed Commissary restaurant in Philadelphia; I have never understood how a restaurant that could make a carrot cake that good could ever close.

The secret ingredient, obviously, is calories. Even a relatively small piece has more than 1,000 calories — which is why you should only have it on your birthday or the birthday of a friend or the birthday of someone in the world, somewhere. Altogether, it contains 3½ sticks of butter, a half-pound of cream cheese, a pound of powdered sugar, 3½ cups of granulated sugar, a bunch of pecans and 1¼ cups of corn oil.

And no matter how many times you joke that it has carrots in it so it has to be healthy, that still doesn't reduce the calorie count on each piece.

But that does not matter. This cake is worth the calories. If you love someone, make this cake for his birthday. If you like someone, make this cake for his birthday. If you don't even know someone, but it's his birthday, make this cake. Make it even if it isn't his birthday.



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Red velvet cake

That said, a traditional birthday cake is nice, too. I'm talking here about a plain yellow cake with chocolate frosting. A white frosting is also good, but the chocolate frosting for this one is truly excellent.

It's called Silky Chocolate Butter Frosting, which is an excellent description. It's silky, it's chocolaty and it's buttery, and although it is rich, it is also quite light.

The frosting is the crowning glory on top of this traditional cake, which is as it should be. The cake itself is lovely, too, and not too sweet. It's just a basic cake, and you can never go wrong with a classic, basic cake.

The recipes for both the cake and the frosting come from Good Housekeeping. That is what makes this the Platonic ideal of cakes; if you were to close your eyes right now and think of "cake," this is the cake you would think of.

Of course, if you are a red-velvet cake lover (and who isn't?), the cake you may think of might actually be deep red in color.

Red velvet cake has been around since the 1800s; it was popular because of the way cocoa powder gives it an exceptionally soft crumb. The distinctive red color originally came about because of the way the cocoa reacted to the acid in the buttermilk. That was later replaced by beet juice and then by red food coloring; the recipe was vigorously marketed by the Adams Extract company after World War II.

What a lot of people don't realize is that, despite the fiercely red hue, the cake itself is mildly flavored. It is pleasant, not intense, with just a hint of cocoa and a couple of splashes of vanilla. As in the case with most cakes (that aren't the carrot cake), the best part is the frosting.

I used a traditional ermine frosting, which was the original topping for red velvet. Ermine, which is also called boiled milk frosting, is light and fluffy and is an absolute dream to

work with. On the other hand, it takes a few steps to make.

But it's worth it. It's so worth it. It brings the red velvet cake to life.

All you need to add are the candles.

(BEST EVER) CARROT CAKE

Yield: 16 servings

For pecan cream filling

1½ cups granulated sugar

¼ cup all-purpose flour

¾ teaspoon salt

1½ cups heavy cream

6 ounces (¾ cup) unsalted butter

1 ¼ cups chopped pecans

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

For carrot cake

1 ¼ cups corn oil

2 cups granulated sugar

2 cups all-purpose flour

2 teaspoons cinnamon

2 teaspoons baking powder

1 teaspoon baking soda

1 teaspoon salt

4 eggs

4 cups grated carrots

1 cup raisins

1 cup chopped pecans

For cream cheese frosting

8 ounces soft unsalted butter

8 ounces soft cream cheese

1 pound powdered sugar

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

For assembly

4 ounces (1 ½ cups) shredded, sweetened coconut

1. Make the filling: In a heavy saucepan, blend well the sugar, flour and salt. Gradually stir in the cream. Add the butter. Cook and stir the mixture over low heat until the butter has melted, then let simmer 20 to 30 minutes until golden brown in color, stirring occasionally. Cool to lukewarm. Stir in the nuts and vanilla. Let cool completely and then refrigerate, preferably overnight. If too thick to spread, bring to room temperature before using.

2. Make the cake: Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour a 10-inch tube cake pan. In a large bowl, whisk together the corn oil and sugar. Sift together the flour, cinnamon, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Sift half the dry ingredients into the sugar-oil mixture and blend. Alternately sift in the rest of the dry ingredients while adding the eggs, one by one. Combine well. Add the carrots, raisins and pecans. Pour into the prepared tube pan and bake for exactly 70 minutes. Cool upright in the pan on a cooling rack. If you are not using the cake that day, it can be removed from the pan, wrapped well in plastic wrap and stored at room temperature.

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