

How to transform homey gingerbread into a stately layer cake

By America's Test Kitchen

Good gingerbread is dark and moist, with an intriguing hint of bitterness and a peppery finish. Usually it's a rustic square cake or maybe even an attractive Bundt, but it's never quite sophisticated enough to serve as the centerpiece holiday dessert.

We wanted to transform homey gingerbread into a stately layer cake. The problem? Traditional recipes are too moist to be stacked four layers high. We knew we could fix the excess moisture problem by cutting back on the molasses or coffee in our recipe or adding a bit more flour. But both strategies would lighten the color and dull the flavor.

Instead, we added a conventional cake ingredient that's unconventional in gingerbread: cocoa powder. Cocoa contains a high proportion of absorbent starch; just 1/4 cup of it soaked up the cake's excess moisture, so the crumb was no longer objectionably sticky. The cocoa also deepened the color and flavor of our gingerbread without making the cake taste chocolaty. As a bonus, it diluted some of the gluten, making the cake's crumb more tender.

Sprinkling chopped crystallized ginger over the top of the cake completed the holiday gingerbread revamp. Use a two-cup liquid measuring cup to portion



Carl Tremblay/America's Test Kitchen via AP

the cake batter. Do not use blackstrap molasses here as it is too bitter.

America's Test Kitchen provided this article to The Associated Press. More recipes, cooking tips, and ingredient and product reviews are available at <www.americastestkitchen.com>.

Gingerbread Layer Cake

Servings: 12-16

Start to finish: 3 hour, 30 minutes

- 1 3/4 cups (8 3/4 ounces) all-purpose flour
- 1/4 cup (3/4 ounce) unsweetened cocoa powder
- 2 tablespoons ground ginger
- 1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 3/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground white pepper
- 1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 cup brewed coffee
- 3/4 cup molasses
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 1/2 cups (10 1/2 ounces) sugar
- 3/4 cup vegetable oil
- 3 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 2 tablespoons finely grated fresh ginger
- 5 cups frosting
- 1/4 cup chopped crystallized ginger (optional)

Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350° Fahrenheit. Grease and flour two 8" round cake pans and line pans with parchment paper. Whisk flour, cocoa, ground ginger, baking powder, cinnamon, salt, pepper, and cayenne together in a large bowl. Whisk coffee, molasses, and baking soda in second large bowl until combined. Add sugar, oil, eggs, and fresh ginger to coffee mixture and whisk until smooth.

Whisk coffee mixture into flour mixture until smooth. Pour 1 1/3 cups batter into each prepared pan. Bake until toothpick inserted in center comes out clean, 12 to 14 minutes. Let cakes cool in pans on a wire rack for 10 minutes. Remove cakes from pan, discarding parchment, and let cool completely on rack, about two hours. Wipe pans clean with paper towels. Let pans cool completely, regrease and re-flour pans, and line with fresh parchment. Repeat process with remaining batter.

Line edges of cake platter with four strips of parchment to keep platter clean. Place one cake layer on platter. Spread 3/4 cup frosting evenly over top, right to edge of cake. Repeat with two more cake layers, pressing lightly to adhere and spreading 3/4 cup frosting evenly over each layer. Top with remaining cake layer and spread remaining frosting evenly over top and sides of cake. Garnish top of cake with crystallized ginger, if using. Refrigerate until frosting is set, about 30 minutes, before serving. (Cake can be refrigerated for up to two days; bring to room temperature before serving.)

Nutrition information per serving: 590 calories (201 calories from fat); 23 g fat (3 g saturated, 5 g trans fats); 38 mg cholesterol; 365 mg sodium; 94 g carbohydrate; 1 g fiber; 75 g sugar; 3 g protein.

How to throw a holiday open house party

By Katie Workman

The Associated Press

There are many ways to entertain, but during the busy holiday season, it's the open house party that I gravitate to.

Not a big, sit-down meal. Not a frenetic, crowded, two-hour cocktail party. Rather, a gentle stretch of time with people coming and going as they please.

With a serve-yourself bar and an array of (mostly) room-temperature food, you can create a relaxed atmosphere that says the whole point was to connect for a little while and share a drink and something good to eat.

Here's how to put together your own open house:

Time and date

Evenings are festive, but consider an afternoon party if you are including a lot of families with kids. A four-hour time frame allows for a nice flow of people coming and going, and hopefully means that you will be able to spend some real time with your guests. Send an invite — either paper or online — and include any helpful information about directions, parking, or attire.

Plan ahead and make lists

1. Write down all tasks, from brining the pork loin to buying flowers to stocking the bathroom with towels and soap.
2. Make a list of what to buy and when to buy it. Shop for non-perishables, including all drinks, as far in advance as possible.
3. Plan out what can be made ahead, and especially what can be frozen.
4. Sketch a timeline for the day: what needs to happen, what gets served when. Name who is responsible for each item.

The food

The key words are "make ahead" and "room temperature." You might pick one or two things to serve hot, like pigs in a blanket, and pop a few batches of those into the oven over the course of the party — or not! Serving one dish from a slow cooker, like a hot dip, is another option for a hot offering.

Start by thinking about a buffet and what foods are happy to sit out for a while. You don't need an enormous menu; four or five offerings are fine. You will likely want to make extras for certain dishes, so you can swap in a fresh plate as the party goes on and new folks arrive.

Also think about color — things that make sense together on a plate. Be sure to have something from every food group. And don't forget to have something for those who are vegetarian and/or gluten-free.

Have a few dessert options as well, placed in a separate area if possible.

If people ask if they can bring something, say yes. You can't have too many desserts during the holidays!

The buffet

Set out all platters and serving utensils at least the night before. Use Post-Its or scraps of paper to label each platter with what it will hold. Take a mental walk-through of your whole menu.

Put out the glasses, plates, utensils, napkins, etc. Don't stress if things don't match: There is a lot of charm in mixing up the various items you own.

Many people turn to plastic or nice paper for larger gatherings, depending on the number of guests and how many dishes

Continued on page 12

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