

Reeder Red Cake

This is another recipe I got from my mother, although I've altered the frosting recipe to make it smoother. Mom didn't create it herself, so I don't think she will mind the change. I'm not sure where she got the recipe, but my xerox of her aging recipe card has "Waldorf Astoria Red Cake" written at the top, so I'm guessing this is somehow related to the urban legend about the woman who was eating at the Waldorf Astoria hotel and asked the waiter for the cake recipe and he said, "We charge three-ninety-five for it," and when her credit card statement came in the mail it was three hundred and ninety five dollars instead of the three dollars and ninety-five cents she was expecting. If you surf the Internet occasionally, you've probably read some version of this story (sometimes it's about Nieman Marcus and a cookie recipe instead). But Mom's had this recipe since long before the Internet existed, so my investigative trail has gone cold.

Anyway, I've decided it's time we renamed this recipe to reflect the history that we know to be true. Mom has made this cake for every birthday in our family since the dawn of time. My brother and I feel that it's not really your birthday unless you have a Redcake, so the tradition is quite entrenched. My brother's wife thinks we are all a bit weird.

There are a multitude of stories connected with the Reeder Redcake. Like the time Mom and I decided to use shortening instead of margarine in the frosting, to make it less icky-looking (the frosting is an unattractive shade of washed-out yellow). It was beautiful, but it tasted horribly bland, and my brother claimed we ruined his birthday.

Then there was the time Mom finally allowed my brother to make the Redcake frosting. It was for my birthday, so I was not an eyewitness (it is considered bad form to make your own birthday Redcake). They apparently had a difference of opinion over how to measure out one-and-one-half cups of sugar using a one-cup measuring cup. Bart decided to do $\frac{3}{4}$ of a cup twice, on the theory that then he wouldn't have to remember whether he'd just poured in a half or a whole cup. (It was one of those Mars/Venus situations.) But Mom has always measured first a cup, then a half a cup, and when she saw Bart stopping at $\frac{3}{4}$, she freaked. (Loyalty to tradition is a big part of the Redcake mystique.) In the ensuing argument, no one remembered to put the remaining three-fourths cup of sugar into the frosting. I got home in time to see Bart literally pouring the frosting over the cake, with a very thoughtful look on his face. ("There's something odd about this frosting...") I don't remember what it tasted like, but I wouldn't recommend this particular alteration.

There are other stories, like the one about Bart dropping the pie, or the one about me locking myself and this other girl in the bathroom of a houseboat, but they don't actually involve the Redcake recipe so I won't tell them here.

This cake is really, really good. My few attempts to make other cakes from other recipes have ended with me returning humbly to the fold, secure in the knowledge that it just doesn't get any better than the Reeder Redcake. The cake is moist and soft, and the frosting is thick and sweet. The whole thing is extraordinarily rich, so no one other than my brother ever wants more than a thin slice at a time. But that's okay, because it keeps well.

It is also a rather challenging recipe, even if you do manage to measure the sugar correctly. The frosting tends to get lumpy, which doesn't affect the flavor much, but makes it look even more unappetizing than usual. (You really have to learn to appreciate the less visible virtues of this frosting.)

Equipment:

- mixer with 2 bowls, one large and one small
- two cake pans
- horizontal cake slicer or dental floss
- small sauce pan for frosting
- slightly larger sauce pan that you can fill with ice water and use to cool the smaller one
- one of those whisks used to remove lumps from gravy (in case you mess up the frosting)

Frosting (make this first):

- 4.5 Tablespoons flour
- 1.25 cups milk
- 1.5 cups sugar
- 3 sticks of margarine
- 1.5 teaspoons vanilla
- 3 Tablespoons powdered sugar

Set 2.25 sticks of margarine out to soften (I frequently forget this step). In sauce pan melt the remaining 3/4 stick of the margarine, then stir in the flour. Add the milk gradually, stirring until blended with a wooden spoon or whisk. If you don't do this right, it will get lumpy. Cook over medium heat until very thick, stirring constantly. Cool to room temperature, stirring frequently while you get started on the cake itself. (You can cool it faster if you place the saucepan in ice water in a larger pot, but you have to stir it constantly if you do this, or the consistency won't remain smooth.)

In small bowl, cream sugar, the softened margarine, and vanilla with an electric mixer until fluffy. (If you forgot to soften the margarine, microwave it for 10-15 seconds, but do not let it melt.) Add cooled flour/milk mixture. Beat until the frosting is the consistency of whipped cream. Add powdered sugar (I frequently forget this too, and it doesn't seem to matter).

Cake:

- 1/2 cup of shortening (it's easier to measure if it's in a stick instead of a tub)
- 1.5 cups sugar
- 1 oz. or 1.5 oz. bottle of red food coloring
- 2 eggs
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 Tablespoon vinegar
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2 Tablespoons cocoa (heaping)
- 1 cup buttermilk (they come in pints -- you can freeze the other half for the next birthday)

Cream shortening, sugar, and eggs. Make a paste of food coloring and cocoa. (If you add them separately, the cocoa gets lumpy and the food coloring splatters onto your clothing when you turn on the mixer. I've tested this.) Add to creamed mixture and mix it in. Add buttermilk alternately with sifted flour and salt. (I have interpreted "alternately" to mean: pour in half the buttermilk, mix, pour in half the flour/salt, mix, pour in the rest of the buttermilk, mix, then pour in the rest the flour/salt, and mix.) Add vanilla and mix well.

In a small dish, add soda to vinegar and let it foam. Swirl it around to complete the reaction. (I have no idea why the recipe calls for this roundabout method of making what is essentially salt and water, but the act has a mysterious, James-Bond feel to it, so I do it. My high school chemistry teacher told us you could make a bomb by combining baking soda and vinegar in a closed container. This was years ago, when it was okay to teach kids how to make bombs.) Then add the result to the cake mixture, blending instead of beating. (I don't know why you're supposed to blend instead of beat at this point. Maybe there's a danger that the cake mix will explode now that you've added the secret ingredient...)

Bake 30-35 minutes at 350 degrees in two 8-inch, greased layer pans. (I usually put a circle of parchment paper in the bottom of each pan.) Cool on rack, and slice each layer into two layers before frosting. How do you slice a cake layer, you ask? Well, you can buy a little contraption with two legs and a wire, and you drag the wire through the cake layer to make two thinner layers. My Mom has one of these Or you can wrap a long strand of dental floss around the cake halfway up from the bottom, tie a half-knot, then slowly tighten the knot to pull the floss into the cake. It can be difficult to keep the dental floss aligned properly, so be careful. Be sure to flip the bottom halves over before frosting them (sandwich the layer between two plates to flip it without breaking it), or you'll have a lot of little red crumbs in the frosting, and this won't help the already-problematic appearance of the frosting.