



Adventure Cooking for Risk Takers

By Mike Willegal

The process of perfecting your favorite recipe is an adventure. I'm rarely satisfied and am always up for the thrill of experimenting with recipes. Once in a while, the adventure may result in a catastrophe, but if you keep experimenting, sooner or later you will figure out how to create a smash hit that your family will be talking about for decades.

I'm always asking people for recipes. I am not an expert baker, but experimenting with different recipes that I get from all kinds of places is a lot of fun. Some of them don't turn out so

well, but it's all part of the journey. When things do work out well, you will get great joy from sharing the results with friends and family.

When something strikes me as particularly well done, I have even asked for recipes in restaurants. Many bakers love to share their secrets. My sister in law, Lourdes, lives in Colorado, has two grown boys and loves to cook for family and friends. Her cakes look and taste like heaven.

A few years ago, after sampling a great chocolate cake that she made for a family celebration, I asked Lourdes to share the recipe with me. Lourdes responded that her recipe wasn't fit to share, as she was still making adjustments. That really surprised me, as the cake I had sampled, seemed absolutely perfect. Eventually, a few months later, I asked again, and she decided that she could share the current version of her recipe with me.

After Lourdes released her recipe to me, I was able to make a great tasting chocolate cake following her directions. However, the appearance of my cake couldn't hold a candle to Lourdes' efforts. I clearly have some more to learn.

A week ago, I had a chat with Lourdes about her cake recipe. The first surprise was that she appeared to be continuing to tweak her chocolate cake recipe. Today's recipe isn't quite the same as the one she sent me, a few years ago. Another thing that amazed me is how much she knew about trying a variety of substitute ingredients and processes.

Certain things are a constant with Lourdes' cakes. She mixes the cake batter by hand with a whisk and the frosting in a stand mixer using the standard paddles that come with any mixer. The reason she mixes the cake batter by hand is mostly related to the extra effort required to clean a stand mixer versus cleaning a simple hand whisk. She mixes dry and wet ingredients separately. Lourdes then adds the wet ingredients to the dry and combines well. Premixing dry

and wet separately ensures a more completely mixed batter. The last step is to add the boiling water and mix again until well combined.

Other things are more variable. The amount of boiling water she adds to the batter varies a bit with altitude. At high altitude, she will be a bit more generous with the water. She also adds an extra egg to the recipe when baking up high. These changes help keep the cake moist.

She usually lines her pans with parchment which is greased with butter or cooking oil or a cooking spray. You can omit the parchment and grease the pan. The greased parchment or pan is then lightly coated in flour. Speaking of pans, in the high altitude of Boulder, she makes the cake in three, eight-inch pans, while in the low altitude of Miami, she uses two nine-inch pans.

The recipe calls for espresso, but Lourdes says that instant coffee works just as well. Lourdes usually uses raspberry jam between the layers of her chocolate cake, but other kinds of preserves or jams can be used. The recipe calls for buttermilk, but almond milk or coconut milk can be used as dairy free substitutes. The taste of the dairy free cake will be just as good as the cake made with milk. Lourdes recommends whole milk instead of buttermilk for low altitude cakes. Speaking of altitude, you might want to try squeezing the juice out of half of a lemon and adding it the batter if you are doing your baking at high altitude.

Lourdes and I have talked about how my cakes rise a lot here in Massachusetts, while she has challenges getting sufficient rise out in Colorado. I think it's funny how my novice attempts sometimes rise more than her expertly made cakes do. Even with the same recipe, your results may differ depending upon your exact circumstances.

You should have fun, like Lourdes does and try tweaking the recipe when you make your next cake. Lourdes adds extra baking soda and baking powder at high altitude. Another difference between our efforts, is how her cakes bake faster in Colorado than mine do in

Massachusetts. This cake takes 27 minutes to bake in Colorado, while in Massachusetts, it takes around 40 minutes for my version to bake. We also check for doneness in different ways.

Lourdes pushes down a bit on the top of the cake with her finger and knows her cakes are done when the cake springs back. In the past, I have been using a toothpick technique. In talking to Lourdes, it seems she is very confident in her method, so I plan on trying her technique next time I make a cake.

Here are some more things that Lourdes does consistently. If the cakes have risen so much that there is a pronounced dome, the domes should be leveled by cutting them off before stacking. This improves the appearance. For best appearance, the bottom layer should be kept right side up, but the top layer is flipped upside down when placed over the lower layers. Once the cake is out of the oven, she stacks the cakes while still warm. This way, the raspberry filling will migrate further into the cake to help flavor it.

As far as the frosting goes, it's from the Hershey's Cocoa container. However, here's a tip that may help your finished cake look more professional. In order to spread the frosting, periodically dip your spatula in hot water, which will keep it warm. This will help with spreading out the frosting more evenly.

Though the recipe that follows should result in a great tasting cake, you should not stop there. Try tweaking the ingredients to suit your particular tastes and desires. Cooking is an adventure and you should enjoy the journey, as much as the result.



One Bowl Chocolate Cake

Ingredients

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 cups sugar
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- 2 teaspoons baking powder, high alt: 1 tsp
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons baking soda, high alt: 2 tsp
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon instant coffee
- 1 cup buttermilk
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup vegetable oil
- 2 large eggs, high alt: 3
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 1 cup boiling water

- Raspberry jam, preserves, jelly

Preparation Steps

1. Preheat oven to 350° F. Prepare two 9-inch cake pans by spraying with baking spray or buttering and lightly flouring.
2. For the cake:
Add flour, sugar, cocoa, baking powder, baking soda, salt and espresso powder to a large bowl. Whisk through to combine well.
3. Mix milk, vegetable oil, eggs, and vanilla. Add to flour mixture and mix together until well combined. Carefully add boiling water to the cake batter until well combined
4. Distribute cake batter evenly between the two prepared cake pans. Bake for 27minutes, until a toothpick or cake tester inserted in the center of the chocolate cake comes out clean or cake springs back when pushed gently in center.
For three 8” cake pans bake ~18 min
5. Remove from the oven and allow to cool for about 10 minutes, remove from the pan and assemble cake with raspberry jam/jelly/preserves between layers.
6. Ice with chocolate frosting.

Frosting

Ingredients

- 1/4 lb Butter
- 2/3 cup Cocoa Powder
- 1/3 cup Milk
- 3 cups Powdered Sugar
- 1 tsp Vanilla Extract

Preparation Steps

1. Melt butter and mix with cocoa powder
2. Warm milk to room temp
3. Slowly add milk and sugar to cocoa/butter mixture

4. Add vanilla
5. Note add milk or sugar to make sure it's not too stiff
6. Taste it, if too buttery, then add more milk and sugar
7. To cut back sweetness, add 1/8 tsp of almond extract