

Living on

Fruitcake Time

IT WAS EARLY NOVEMBER AND I WAS FEELING POSITIVELY MEDIEVAL, listening to Anonymous 4 singing the music of Hildegard von Bingen from their "11,000 Virgins" album as I chopped pecans for fruitcakes. With more than a month before Christmas, there was still time to make my annual mélange of fruits (candied, yes, but extra heavy on the dried kind for zip and tang), nuts, molasses, butter and brandy, baked into a fragrant terrazzo-like loaf. Four days from now, those brandy-soaked loaves, each wrapped in cheesecloth and looking like an early Christian reliquary, will be distributed to family and friends. Whether they want one or not. I've been doing this for years. It's my Christmas joke. One that might grow tired but never stale.

Don't get me wrong. I make fruitcakes for me. I imagine the world's first fruitcake sprang from a need to preserve the fall harvest for a winter's worth of sweets. My fruitcakes preserve me, provide a grounding ritual to the giving season. I'd much rather be tossing a half-ton of fruits and nuts into my grocery basket, like some squirrel on the verge of hibernation, than shuffling

CALIFORNIA-STYLE FRUITCAKE

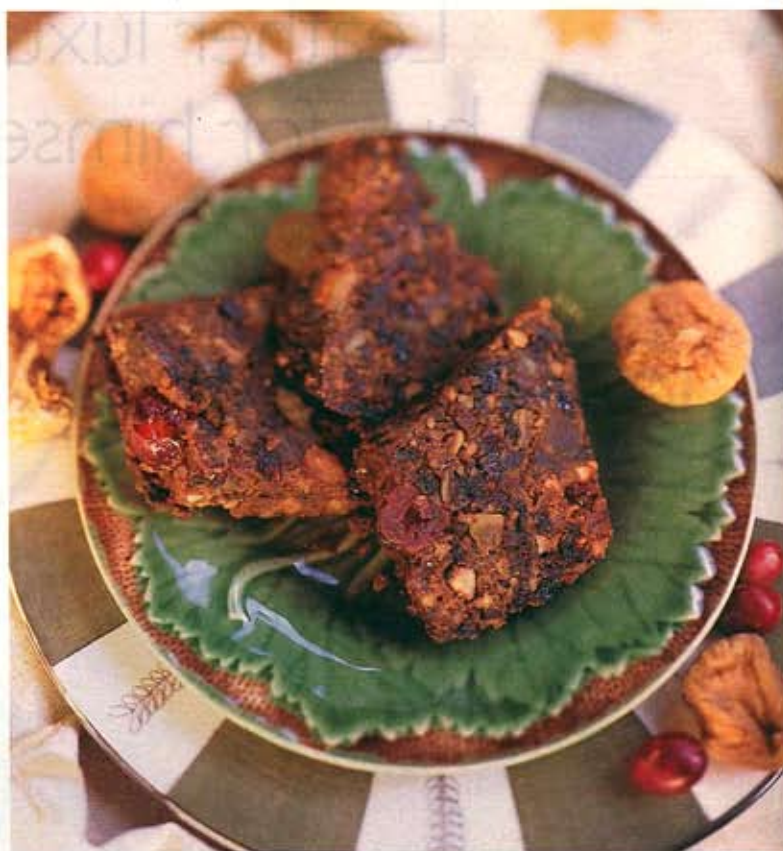
(Makes about 8 9-inch loaves)

1 pound blanched almonds	8 to 10 ounces jam, preferably blackberry
1/2 pound pecans	4 teaspoons ground cinnamon
1/4 pound walnuts	1/2 teaspoon ground allspice
4 pounds mixed candied fruit	2 teaspoons ground nutmeg
1 pound seedless raisins	1 teaspoon ground cloves
10 ounces dried figs	1 pound butter
1 pound pitted dates	1 pound brown sugar
1/2 pound currants	1 cup molasses
1/2 pound dried apricots	12 eggs
1/2 pound dried cherries	1 pound flour (3 1/2 to 4 cups)
1/2 pound dried blueberries	2 teaspoons salt
1/2 pound dried cranberries	whole blanched almonds and whole candied cherries for decoration
1/2 to 1 cup crystallized ginger (optional)	brandy for soaking
1/2 cup or more brandy	

Chop nuts and fruits (grind dates and figs if you can because they're sticky, or be prepared for more chopping) and combine in large bowl. Add brandy, jam and spices; mix well and set aside. In separate bowl, cream butter, then add brown sugar, molasses and eggs that have been beaten until foamy; mix well. Add flour and salt to create batter and pour over fruit mixture. Combine thoroughly. Add flour or brandy if needed. Dough should be fairly stiff, not runny.

Preheat oven to 275 degrees with pan of hot water in bottom of oven for moisture during baking. Grease loaf pans well and line with heavy waxed, brown or parchment paper. Fill pans with dough until three-fourths full. Decorate cakes by pressing almonds and cherries into tops. Bake until straw or toothpick comes out clean (about 2 hours and 45 minutes). Be careful not to overbake or burn.

After baking, place cakes in pans on racks to cool. Slowly pour a little brandy on top of each. Wait 15 minutes, then invert cakes on waxed paper on racks, remove baking paper and pour more brandy over each. Warm cakes absorb brandy better than cool cakes. When cakes are completely cooled, wrap in cheesecloth, then aluminum foil or plastic wrap. Store in airtight containers.



through a mall in search of the latest nose-hair clipper for that special someone. I think of my hefty, brick-shaped gems as ammo for everyone on my list. For those who welcome them, my moist, dense cakes are considered friendly fire. For those who don't, it's time to duck and run.

"Mother, I'm making fruitcakes," I said, shoulder pressing phone to my ear as I stirred batter in the sink-sized stainless-steel bowl bought just for this purpose.

"I've still got one from last year in my freezer," she said politely.

What she really meant was, she will not answer the door if I show up with another one this year. My sister once left my gift-wrapped loaf on her mantel. It became part of the decor, as if to ward off future fruitcakes. It worked.

On the other hand, lots of people love my fruitcakes, and I feel derelict if I don't make them. My friend Caroline rips at the cake with her hands, breaking off dark chunks to gnaw on eagerly. I'm afraid to *not* give her one.

My husband, who covets my fruitcakes, was drawn to the kitchen by the scent of cinnamon and allspice permeating the house. Between nibbles of batter, he told me the "11,000" of the album title was the medieval way of saying countless. I looked at the yellowed newspaper recipe I've improved on over the years and noticed the date was Nov. 2, 1977. My recipe was 50 years old that exact day. I had to sniff a pinch of cloves to stop the room from spinning. Not only was I guilty of making countless fruitcakes, I was living on fruitcake time. Innumerable people, cats, homes, careers and direct mail Christmas catalogs have passed through my life, while one thing has remained essentially the same—my fruitcake output.

The sentimental fruitcake-making me wanted to pause and have a sip of soaking brandy—despite the early hour—to toast the moment. The cynical, opportunistic me, my bare hands sunk into the batter for final mixing, the abrasive chunks providing a mud-like massage, thought there must be a screenplay in here somewhere. And I bet, with just a few phone calls, I could find one of my original fruitcakes to star in it. —NANCY SPILLE

Nancy Spille's last article for the magazine was on garden chiggers