

Festive fruitcake

As in many other parts of the world, fruitcake is synonymous with the festive season in South Africa. Almost everyone knows a fruitcake baker in their community — usually an experienced baker that cherishes the ritual, because baking a proper fruitcake is not light work. It is believed that an authentic South African fruitcake should be ripened with brandy (some recipes call for weeks of ‘feeding and ripening’) and be able to last at least two months without refrigeration. This means that most fruitcakes are baked by the end of October, to be ready for consumption at Christmas.

South Africa has thriving dried-fruit and brandy industries, which contribute two of the main components of South African fruitcake. It seems only fit, then, that this spiced, boozy confection would be loved dearly in this country. The addition of preserved green figs is optional, but if you’re already preserving figs at the end of October (see page 231), you might as well add a few to your cake. A big shout-out to chef Mynhardt Joubert from Paarl who undertakes an enormous annual festive fruitcake drive in aid of multiple children’s charities. He has sold close to 3 000 cakes in 2024, which is his eighth year of running the campaign.

Note

Spoon over more brandy after two weeks, if desired. Slice and serve at teatime, or with custard as a dessert.

MAKES 1 X SQUARE 20-CM CAKE OR 1 X ROUND 23-CM CAKE

200 g seedless raisins	250 g butter, softened	350 g (2½ cups) self-raising flour
250 g sultanas	200 g (1 cup tightly packed) dark-brown sugar	5 ml (1 tsp) baking soda
250 g pitted dates, roughly chopped	30 ml (2 Tbsp) golden syrup	10 ml (2 tsp) ground cinnamon
200 g glacé cherries	5 XL eggs	5 ml (1 tsp) salt
100 g preserved green figs, roughly chopped (optional)	10 ml (2 tsp) vanilla essence	100–150 g walnuts or pecans or almonds, roughly chopped
180 ml (¾ cup) brandy, plus extra*	grated rind of a lemon	

SOAK THE FRUIT

In a large bowl, add the raisins, sultanas, dates, cherries, green figs and brandy. Stir gently, then leave to steep overnight (at least 12 hours or up to 24 hours).

PREPARE THE PAN

Line a 20-cm square deep baking dish (or a round cake tin of 23 cm) with three layers of baking paper, on the bottom and up the sides, with the sides overhanging slightly for ease of turning out. Spray the top layer with non-stick baking spray, then set aside. Cut a square (or round) of paper slightly smaller than the surface of the pan, then spray it with non-stick spray and set aside (you’ll place this on top of the batter). Preheat the oven to 150 °C.

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PREPARE THE BATTER

To a large mixing bowl, add the butter, sugar and syrup. Use electric beaters to mix until light and creamy. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition. Add the vanilla and lemon rind and beat briefly. In a second mixing bowl, add the flour, baking soda, cinnamon and salt, then stir with a whisk. Add the dry ingredients to the egg mixture and stir with a spatula until no floury pockets remain. Add the nuts and steeped fruit and stir until well incorporated. Spoon the mixture into the prepared lined tin, smoothing the top, then place the prepared square (or round) of baking paper greased side down on top of the batter. Bake for 2.5 hours until fully cooked, then remove from the oven and remove the paper at the top. Pour over 4 Tbsp brandy, then leave to cool in the tin. When completely cooled, carefully remove from the tin, then turn the cake over and remove the baking paper. Pour another 4 Tbsp brandy over the bottom of the cake. Wrap the cake tightly in foil, then store in an airtight container in a cool place for up to 8–10 weeks.

Stewed dried fruit

South Africa produces some of the finest dried fruit in the world because of our hot, dry climate and rich soil. Ever since Dutch settlers first planted fruit trees in the 17th century, fruit has been dried and preserved for later enjoyment. Since then, it has become synonymous with South African cooking. Stewed fruit can be found on many breakfast tables with yoghurt, as a side dish to a roast, bredie or braai, or as a dessert, served with baked puddings or simply with custard. The addition of rooibos tea is a popular way to add even more authentic South African flair.

SERVES 6 AS A SIDE DISH

500 g mixed dried fruit (peaches, prunes, apricots, apples etc.)

500 ml (2 cups) water

100 g (½ cup) sugar

1 rooibos teabag

1 stick cinnamon

3 whole cloves

1 star anise (optional)

a piece of naartjie or orange peel

Place all the ingredients in a pot over medium heat and bring to a simmer, pressing the fruit under the liquid. Simmer for about 20 minutes until the fruit has softened, then remove the tea bag and leave to cool. Serve warm or at room temperature.

