

KITCHEN NOTES

THE IRRESISTIBLE ALLURE OF SNACKING CAKES

My family fell under the spell of Yossy Arefi's simple recipes for cakes that are meant to be eaten anytime.



By Hannah Goldfield

January 30, 2022



Each recipe in Arefi's cookbook "Snacking Cakes" is as clever and appealing as it is simple and genuinely easy. Photograph by Yossy Arefi

I can pinpoint the exact moment when I started to reconsider cake. For most of my life, I'd thought of it exclusively as a celebratory confection: to be eaten—for dessert, usually—on the occasion of a birthday, an anniversary, or a wedding. Then, one summer in college, I spent a month in Brazil's Atlantic Forest, where I was enrolled in a conservation-biology course on the tiny, rural campus of an institute for ecological research. A staff of local women prepared and provided not only breakfast, lunch, and dinner, but also two coffee breaks, midmorning and midafternoon. The indisputable star of the latter, *café da tarde*, was cake, cut into neat squares: *bolo de fubá*, made with cornmeal, coconut, condensed milk, on one day; dense chocolate frosted in buttercream another; vanilla sponge layered with strawberry jam and vanilla cream the next.

For weeks, I had a piece every afternoon. What at first felt unreasonably indulgent came to seem necessary: I was working up a fierce appetite tromping through the steamy forest and its interstitial patches of farmland, testing the pH levels of soil, running from cows, scanning treetops for monkeys and sloths. This cake was not dessert; this cake was sustenance. More important, it

was a daily pleasure formally sanctioned, with no whiff of the guilt that I would have felt eating cake so regularly in my normal life.

The concept of everyday cake is upheld by cultures around the world. Cake features prominently in the ritual of English afternoon tea as well as in the Swedish coffee break known as *fika*. Italians eat cake for breakfast. American dietary culture, to the extent that it can be defined, tends to swing between wild excess and excessive restraint without stopping in between; it's either deep-fried Oreos or Gwyneth Paltrow's recipe for frozen-banana "ice cream," hold the cream. It was hard to imagine eating a slice or two of cake every day at home. When I went back to the States, I went back to cake-free afternoons.

Then, last winter, I became aware of a new cookbook, published in October of 2020 by the writer, photographer, and food stylist Yossy Arefi, called "Snacking Cakes: Simple Treats for Anytime Cravings." Forget "cellar door"; is there a more beautiful sequence of words in the English language than "snacking cakes"? A British friend told me that she finds it redundant ("Cakes are only good when they're snacked on—I hate eating cake after a meal!"), but to me it was a revelation. In the past couple of years, cake has become an unlikely artistic medium—quite avant-garde, the more fantastical the better—and sometimes a proxy for socializing: if you're going to be alone, or even in a small group, you might as well do something over-the-top festive, not to mention Instagram-ready. "Why make a cake plain when you can make it insane?" Madeline Bach, the baker behind a small cake operation called Frosted Hag, said in an interview for a *Times* article titled "Let Them Eat (Wacky, Whimsical) Cake." I wouldn't turn down a slice of Bach's vanilla cake with "blood-orange-curd filling, topped with lemon Swiss meringue buttercream, blood orange slices, chrysanthemum flowers, sugar pearls and dried baby's breath," but, thanks to Arefi's book, quieter cakes have become a staple of my diet.

In the introduction to "Snacking Cakes," Arefi defines the term—which, she is quick to note, she didn't coin. A snacking cake is "a single layer cake, probably square, covered with a simple icing—or nothing at all—and it must be truly easy to make," requiring little "besides a reasonably stocked pantry, a bowl, and a whisk," she writes. Each recipe builds on the same basic formula: an egg or two (though one of the cakes is vegan) beaten with sugar, and then whisked with butter or oil,

milk (or buttermilk, coconut milk, yogurt, sour cream, or ricotta), a cup or so of flour (in some instances gluten-free), salt, baking soda and/or baking powder. Add-ins of fruit, chocolate, nuts, and spices are folded in at the end, and some of the finished cakes get glazed or served with dollops of flavored whipped cream.

“I always want to show people that baking is not as intimidating as we think it is,” Arefi told me recently, by phone. “There’s a lot of writing about how baking is so scientific, not like cooking. And I think that can be really intimidating. ‘Snacking Cakes’ was a really great way to show that it doesn’t have to be super hard, you don’t have to get everything in the kitchen dirty. You can bake something really satisfying, and it can only take an hour.” All of the cakes are “weeknight friendly,” she notes; she couldn’t have known at the time of writing (she submitted the text to her publisher in January of 2020) how pandemic-friendly they would be, both in terms of effort and ingredients required and of mood-boosting potential. “When I have a snacking cake on my countertop,” she wrote, “I sneak a little slice every time I walk by.” During days and weeks spent mostly sequestered, sneaking little slices of cake—not to mention the meditative process of baking one—can stave off malaise. A snacking cake is a perfect candidate for “procrastibaking”; I baked more than one when, technically, I should have been writing this article, although I suppose you could call that research.

What makes “Snacking Cakes” perhaps my favorite cookbook of all time, and by far my most used (I tend to collect and read cookbooks lovingly, but rarely commit), is how Arefi adheres to constraints without sacrificing creativity. Each cake is as clever and appealing as it is simple and genuinely easy to make. During an early page-through of the book, I started to use Post-it flags to mark the cakes I wanted to bake, before realizing it was a futile exercise; I wanted to bake them all. Paging through the book is also part of its pleasure; as noted by my cousin Sarah, a veteran bookseller and fellow “Snacking Cakes” aficionado, the book’s trim size—the height and width of the pages—“is about the size of the cakes,” which Arefi prefers baking in an eight-by-eight-inch pan, though she offers modifications for pans of other sizes and shapes.

And so, I—and other fans, Arefi told me—have been steadily making my way, “Julie & Julia” style, through each and every one of the fifty recipes, which are categorized into four sections: “fruit,”

“warm + toasty,” “chocolatey,” and “not your average vanilla.” I’ve whisked frozen passion-fruit pulp into batter for a cake that I shellacked in a bright-pink glaze made with freeze-dried strawberries. When fresh strawberries appeared at the greenmarket last summer, I sliced and layered them carefully atop a cake made with whole-milk yogurt and whole-grain flour. I thrilled to the combination of rhubarb and sumac in a crumb cake so nice I baked it twice. I’ve folded blackberries and blueberries into fluffy curds of ricotta, stirred crystallized ginger into shredded sweet potato and pear, and mixed cinnamon, cardamom, and allspice into pumpkin puree and olive oil, which also went into a maple glaze. For a friend’s birthday, torn between a lemony olive-oil cake and another featuring chocolate and peanut butter, I made both—the first in a silicone mini-loaf mold, purchased for the express purpose of more easily sharing snacking cakes, the second in a muffin tin—and presented her with a box of mixed confections.

Even after I’ve made them all, I won’t be done: the recipes are modular, each with a sidebar of ideas for substitutions and variations, and suggestions for mixing and matching batters and toppings. I am a strict recipe-follower, not a developer, but “Snacking Cakes” has given me the freedom to be a little creative in the kitchen. As I glazed those lemony olive-oil mini-loaves, a plastic tub of pink peppercorns sitting on my counter caught my eye. Emboldened by Arefi’s style, I decided to crack them on top, to excellent effect. Arefi’s recipe for carrot cake calls for topping it with just chopped toasted pecans and flaky salt, but I knew she would approve of my borrowing the cream cheese glaze from her recipe for red velvet cake when I made it for a friend who requested frosting.

We do not observe a formal *café da tarde* or afternoon tea in my home. However, like the Italians, we do make a regular breakfast of cake. In 2020, Maurice Sendak’s picture book “In the Night Kitchen” became a favorite of my then one-year-old son, Otto. It tells the story of a kid named Mickey, who dreams that a trio of mustachioed bakers stir him into a giant bowl of batter, crying, “Milk! Milk! Milk for the morning cake!” Spoiler alert: Mickey avoids the oven, and the book concludes with a pleasingly cryptic epilogue: “And that’s why, thanks to Mickey, we have cake every morning.”

For Otto’s first birthday, I’d been sugar-shy and baked him an underwhelming whole-wheat cake

sweetened with homemade applesauce and topped with unsweetened whipped cream. He didn't seem to mind, but, by the time I got my hands on "Snacking Cakes," my resolve to make him a healthy eater had mostly dissolved. I figured a daily serving of frozen peas was enough to balance a daily serving of "morning cake."

For his second birthday, I adapted Arefi's recipe for vanilla buttermilk cake into cupcakes and took the suggestion from her sidebar of "flavor variations" to add rainbow-colored sprinkles to the batter, for a Funfetti effect. Eight months later, Otto is suddenly capable of new tricks, like jumping into the air without holding onto anything and putting his arms into shirt sleeves without assistance. Early on a recent Saturday, he let me tie one of my grandmother's aprons around his waist, and then he climbed up on a kitchen stool to help me dump cocoa powder into a bowl for an airy but intensely flavorful vegan chocolate-coconut cake.

We ate chocolate-coconut cake for breakfast—and again with midmorning coffee, after lunch, and after dinner, steadily shaving it down in neat rows. A couple of days later, Otto told his babysitter that he and I had baked a cake, and that we'd saved her a piece. Reader, we had not. What could I do but bake another? My cousin Sarah mentioned that "Snacking Cakes" has changed the way she fills her grocery cart—"If I think of it, I throw in ricotta," she told me—and the same is true for me: because of Arefi, my fridge is never without sour cream, which has a pretty long shelf life and which I whisked into the batter for Arefi's "powdered donut cake," a particularly good example of the book's low-effort, high-reward principle. As delicious as a donut, much easier than pie: cake, glorious cake.

POWDERED DONUT CAKE

Adapted from "Snacking Cakes," by Yossy Arefi.

Ingredients

- ¾ cup (150 g) granulated sugar
- 2 large eggs

- 1 cup (220 g) sour cream
- ½ cup (113 g) plus 1 Tbsp. unsalted butter, melted
- 1 ¼ tsp. freshly grated nutmeg
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- ¾ tsp. kosher salt
- 1 ½ cups (190 g) all-purpose flour
- 1 ½ tsp. baking powder
- ¼ tsp. baking soda
- 3 Tbsp. confectioners' sugar

Directions

1. Position a rack in the center of your oven and preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Coat an 8-inch square baking pan with butter or nonstick spray. Line the pan with a strip of parchment paper that hangs over two of the edges.
2. Make the cake: In a large bowl, whisk the granulated sugar and eggs until pale and foamy, about 1 minute. Add the sour cream, ½ cup butter, nutmeg, vanilla, and salt. Whisk until smooth and emulsified.
3. Add the flour, baking powder, and baking soda. Whisk until well combined and smooth.
4. Pour the batter into the pan and bake the cake until puffed and golden, and a skewer inserted into its center comes out clean, 25 to 35 minutes. Set the pan on a rack to cool for about 15 minutes. Then use the parchment paper to lift the cake out of the pan and set it on the rack to cool almost completely.
5. Finish the cake: While the cake is just warm to the touch, brush the top with 1 Tbsp. melted butter and dust with the confectioners' sugar. You should have a nice thick layer of confectioners' sugar—more than you think might be necessary. (Store the cake, covered, at room temperature for up to three days. The cake will absorb the sugar on top, so it might need a fresh dusting of

confectioners' sugar after the second day.)

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