

Emily Dickinson's Black Cake Recipe

Adapted by Margery K. Eagan

This is a good "do-ahead" cake, since the brandy syrup needs time to soak in.

Ingredients

1 ½ cups brandy, divided	1 ½ lbs. soft butter	1 ½ tsp. salt (or none if using
3 cups sugar	(salted or unsalted)	salted butter)
1 ¾ lbs. raisins	1 ½ lbs. granulated sugar	1 ¼ tsp. cinnamon
8 oz. currants	13 eggs at room temperature	1 ¼ tsp. ground cloves
8 oz. dried apricots, cut in ½" pieces (size of raisins)	1 ½ tsp. vanilla	1 ¼ tsp. mace
8 oz. pitted prunes, cut in ½" pieces	¼ c. molasses	1 ½ tsp. ground nutmeg
2 oz. dried pears, cut in ½" pieces	1 ½ lbs. unbleached flour	¼ tsp. ground cardamom
4 oz. pitted dates cut in ½" pieces	4 ½ tsp. baking powder	¼ tsp. ground ginger
	1 ½ tsp. baking soda	

The day before baking the cake, if possible, prepare brandy syrup: In a 2 qt. saucepan over medium heat, mix 3 c. sugar with 2 c. water until sugar dissolves. Let cool and add approximately 1 c. brandy (more or less to taste). The brandy can be a Cognac-type by itself, or a combination of flavors including amaretto or hazelnut liqueur. Your taste buds can guide you here. (See notes about storing any leftover syrup.)

In a large bowl, toss all raisins, currants, apricots, prunes, pears, and dates with ½ cup brandy. Let stand overnight, preferably, or an hour, or just while you get the other ingredients together.

Preheat oven to 350°.

Butter a 13" X 18" X 2 ½" pan and line with wax paper or parchment: butter paper or parchment. (See notes about using different pans—you don't have to make just one cake.) Two large cardboard cake boards will be helpful if you are making a large cake.

Sift together the flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt (omit if using salted butter), cinnamon, cloves, mace, nutmeg, cardamom, and ginger.

In a separate and very large bowl, cream the butter and gradually add the sugar, keeping mixture light. Add eggs 3 at a time, beating well after each addition and scraping sides of bowl several times to keep mixture uniform. Add vanilla. With mixer going, pour in molasses. Mixture might look broken, but that's ok. On low speed, gradually add sifted dry ingredients, mixing just until flour is incorporated. Place fruit mixture on top of batter, leaving any liquid at the bottom of fruit in the bowl. (Save the liquid and add to the brandy syrup.) Fold fruit into batter, taking care not to overmix. (Note: with this much batter, make sure your spatula is sturdy; otherwise, your hands are your best folding tools.)

Turn batter into pan, smooth the top, and bake for at least one hour, or until the middle top of cake is firm to the touch. The cake will be very dark on top and slightly sunken.

Let cake cool in pan. (Note: if you want to present the cake with a smooth top, level the top of the cake with a serrated knife. It will be inverted later, making the bottom the top.) Invert cake onto large wax paper-covered board and back again onto another board. The paper should prevent the top of the cake from sticking to the board. With a skewer, poke several holes through the cake at 1" intervals. Begin brushing/tapping the brandy-sugar syrup evenly over the cake, allowing a few minutes for the syrup to soak in before brushing on more. If the cake seems moist enough, it may not be necessary to use all the syrup.

Wrap cake well in plastic wrap (or slide it into a large clean plastic bag) and allow to stand for at least 1 hour—or, preferably, a day or two, in a cool place. Slide cake carefully onto a large serving platter. (Or, for a smooth top: invert onto platter.) Keep the cake covered until presentation time. Fresh greens and flowers around the cake add a festive touch.

Notes

This recipe makes about 20 cups of batter. Since an average loaf pan uses between 4 and 5 cups of batter, this recipe would make about 4 large loaf cakes. In 9" round pans: probably 5 or 6 layers. Or, in a 12" x 2" round, perhaps 2 layers. You get the idea, though: you can bake the batter in any size and shape. Butter and paper the pans, and fill them about 2/3 full for proper baking.

If freezing cakes: Remove cooled cakes from pans and wrap well. After thawing, and at least 1 hour before serving, brush/soak with brandy syrup. **Leftover syrup:** Tightly-covered, the syrup will keep, refrigerated, for several weeks. If you've made small cakes and have frozen them, use the syrup as you need it.