

Christmas cake

Why not cook up your Christmas gifts this year? A gift you have cooked yourself with the best ingredients possible is better than anything that can be purchased in the shops.

I use a tried and tested Christmas cake recipe which I have baked for decades, adding a little more brandy than the recipe suggests just for good measure - my friends love it. Rather than give them a large round cake, I cook them in 1lb loaf tins, which seems just the right size. (This recipe makes two).

It's not too late to get the mixing bowl out and make a few too, and if you have a drop of brandy over when the cakes are finished you can always drink it yourself, raising your glass to the approaching festive season and the friends you will be sharing it with.

You will need:

- 9oz (225g) plain flour
- ¼ tspn salt
- 1 tspn ground mixed spice
- 8oz (200g) soft butter
- 8oz (200g) soft dark brown sugar
- 2 tbsps black treacle
- ½ tspn vanilla essence
- 2oz (50g) ground almonds
- 4 free range eggs - lightly beaten
- 4oz (100g) chopped mixed peel
- 2lb (800g) mixed dried fruit
- 6oz glace cherries, halved
- Brandy
- 2 1lb loaf tins and paper cake liner
- To garnish an assortment of nuts and glacé cherries
- 2 tbsps redcurrant jelly to glaze when cooked.

Method:

- Set the oven to 150°C / 300°F or gas mark 2 and line the two tins with paper liners.
- Cream the butter, sugar, treacle and vanilla essence together until light and fluffy.
- Add the eggs and beat well.
- Sift in the flour, ground mixed spice, salt and ground almonds and stir well, then add the dried fruit and all other ingredients except the brandy.
- Divide the mixture between the two loaf tins, smooth over the top, then decorate as illustrated using assorted nuts and glacé cherries.
- Bake for approximately 2¾ to 3 hours until an inserted skewer comes out clean when dipped into the middle.

- Leave to settle for a while, then dribble brandy over the cake: a couple of tablespoons will do but a few more won't do any harm.
- When cool melt the redcurrant jelly with a little water and brush over the topping until it shines.
- Wrap in greaseproof paper, then festive paper, tie with a ribbon and distribute among your friends just before Christmas.