

CULTURE & ARTS

TRAVELING WITH JEWISH TASTE

Honey, I Baked the Cake!

By Carol Goodman Kaufman

I have never liked honey cake, but in 1989 I came to detest it. My mother had just died on the day of Erev Rosh Hashanah. As if that wasn't bad enough, virtually everybody who came to pay a shiva call brought a honey cake. Loaves, tubes, squares of it. I've come to believe that honey cake is the Jewish version of the much-maligned Christmas fruit cake. And I suspect that people just pass it on until it's been through every house in the community, at which point it becomes a doorstop.

And then there's the honey cake recipe that's been handed down by somebody's Great Aunt Raizel. "It's absolutely the best," they say. No, it's not. I. Do. Not. Like. Honey. Cake.

But what kind of Jewish girl am I? Honey is something we are educated to love. After all, the Torah entices us with images of "a land flowing with milk and honey." True, some archaeologists believe that the honey referred to in the Torah is not the clover variety that we can purchase at the local Price Chopper. Rather, it is the syrup made from dates. Why these scholars ignore the many references to bees and hives in the very same Torah is a matter for another article by a more learned writer than I.



Silan

But that nugget of honey trivia has stuck in my brain for a long time. So, when our son Avi and wife Shira returned from a family visit to Israel, they brought us a jar of *silan*, date syrup. It sat in the pantry for a while until one day I used it to sweeten some plain Greek yogurt. Delicious!

Then I had a flash of inspiration. (I really can't use the word "epiphany" in a Jewish paper, can I?) Could the traditional High Holiday dessert be made not only palatable, but scrumptious? Why not substitute *silan* for regular clover honey in the hated cake recipe?

It was time to start experimenting. Test 1: Simply substitute *silan* for the clover honey in one of the umpteen recipes that populate Jewish cookbooks.

Result: Okay, but nothing special.

Test 2: The first sticky toffee pudding that I ever had was at a local restaurant. Joel and I had shared a little ramekin of the dessert. It was so yummy that we both rued the decision to split it. Fast forward to today, while contemplating the honey cake conundrum, the sensory memory of that amazing confection came charging through my gray cells and I also recalled that this iconic British dessert is made with dates. So, I figured, why not try making the cake portion of sticky toffee pudding with *silan*? Of course, a traditional pudding is served with copious amounts of butter- and cream-infused toffee sauce, something a kashrut-keeping family would not use after a meat meal. But if the resulting Test 2 cake would come out as rich and decadent as the restaurant sample I remembered, then perhaps we could avoid the custard altogether. If not, then I would be off on a hunt for ersatz heavy cream.

Result: No need for the sauce. This cake is rich and delicious.

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Medjool dates on the tree

Under the name Carolinda Goodman, **Carol Goodman Kaufman** has just published her third picture book for young children. Detective Bears and Friends introduces readers to the whimsical names that various animal groups are called. In addition to her work for children, Kaufman also writes under her "real" name about food history (including for the *Berkshire Jewish Voice*). Her first novel, *The First Murder*, is set in the Berkshires.



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Date Honey Cake

Serves 12

INGREDIENTS:

½ cup coconut oil or pareve margarine, room temperature
 2 cups all-purpose flour
 1 cup *silan*
 1 cup Medjool dates, chopped
 1 teaspoon baking soda
 2 teaspoons baking powder

½ teaspoon kosher salt
 1 cup (packed) brown sugar
 2 teaspoons minced fresh ginger
 3 large eggs, at room temperature
 ½ cup raisins (optional but nice to have for taste and texture)
 Turbinado sugar for garnish

DIRECTIONS:

Preheat oven to 350°F.

Coat a bundt pan with flour-infused baking spray. (A bundt pan makes for a prettier cake than a tube, but if you don't have one, then use the tube.)

Put dates into a small bowl with baking soda and toss to coat, then pour in ½ cup boiling water. Let mixture sit for about 15 minutes, then mash with a fork until thick, but not smooth.

While the dates are soaking, whisk the baking powder, salt, and the flour in a medium bowl.

In an electric mixer at high speed, beat brown sugar, fresh ginger, and coconut oil/margarine until light and fluffy, 3-4 minutes.

Add eggs one at a time, beating to blend before adding the next.

Alternate dry ingredients, date mash, and *silan* half at a time, starting with dry ingredients and ending with the *silan*.

Fold in the raisins.

Scrape batter into the pan.

Bake cake until top is firm and springs back when gently pressed with your fingers and a tester inserted into the center comes out clean, 45-55 minutes, depending on your oven. Check with a toothpick after 45 minutes.

Let cake cool in pan 15 minutes before turning out onto rack.

Enjoy! And Happy New Year!

SAVE THE DATE

MIDDLE EAST UPDATE 2024



**Ambassador
 Dennis Ross**
 Thursday, November 14
 7:00 pm via Zoom

Join foremost Middle East expert and diplomat Ambassador Dennis Ross to analyze Israel's current political and social situation including the war on Gaza, and explore its impact on US-Israel relations and the broader geopolitics of the Middle East. Q&A to follow.

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