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BAKING & DESSERTS

Carrot cake with brown butter cream cheese frosting

By Sarra Sedghi · Rough Draft Atlanta, 4/11/2025

Ingredients

CAKE

- [ ] 2 cups white sugar
- [ ] 1 ¼ cups olive oil
- [ ] 4 large eggs
- [ ] 2 tsp vanilla extract
- [ ] 2 cups all-purpose flour
- [ ] 2 tsp baking soda
- [ ] 2 tsp baking powder
- [ ] 2 tsp ground cinnamon
- [ ] 1 tsp nutmeg
- [ ] 1/2 tsp ground cloves
- [ ] 1/2 tsp ground ginger
- [ ] ½ tsp salt
- [ ] 3 cups grated carrots

FROSTING

Directions

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit.
2. Combine flour, baking soda, baking powder, salt, and all spices into a large mixing bowl.
3. In a separate bowl, whisk together oil, eggs, sugar, and vanilla until smooth, by hand or with an electric mixer. Slowly add in the dry ingredient mixture. Fold in shredded carrots.
4. Pour mixture into a prepared 10 x 14-inch pan and bake for 40 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted into the cake comes out clean. Remove from oven and let cool.
5. Meanwhile, melt ½ cup salted butter in a light-colored pan over medium heat. Once melted, to medium-low, stirring occasionally the butter turns golden brown, about five minutes.
6. Let cool and transfer to the refrigerator until solid, about 30 minutes to one hour.

- [ ] ½ cup brown butter (use salted butter)
- [ ] 8 oz cream cheese
- [ ] 4 cups powdered sugar
- [ ] 2 tsp vanilla extract

7. Once solid, add browned butter to a mixing bowl and beat with cream cheese until smooth, using an electric mixer on low. Slowly add powdered sugar and vanilla extract, increasing the mixer speed to medium.
8. Spread frosting over the cake while still slightly warm to ensure a gooey texture.

The story

Carrot cake is considered a classic dessert, but its history dates back to medieval Europe and likely evolved from puddings.

“Sweeteners, especially sugar, were scarce and expensive [in the Middle Ages], so carrots were used as a substitute in desserts,” said Loan Ly, owner of custom dessert company Lonely Sweets.

But carrot cake didn’t take its present-day form or reach peak popularity until the 20th century.

During World War II, sugar rationing and the United Kingdom’s emphasis on carrot consumption brought the cake back into fashion. Thanks to the incorporation of fresh vegetables and an oil-based batter, carrot cake already boasts a good amount of natural moisture. (Oil-based cakes stay fresh longer than butter-based cakes.) At a time when butter and sugar were rationed, Depression and war-era desserts like water pie and carrot cake helped sustain people and satisfy a sweet tooth.

After World War II, carrot cake became even sweeter — literally. Before the war, carrot cake may have been topped with whipped cream. Today, it features a sugary cream cheese frosting, which helped the spice cake gain more traction in the United States, especially at restaurants and cafes.

“Cream cheese frosting didn’t become popularized with carrot cake until the 1960s,” Ly said. “[It] has since become the go-to topping.”

Carrot cake was also touted as a health food in the 1980s, thanks to its vegetable-driven main ingredient. It’s since returned to its dessert roots, having become a fixture at spring and summer tables.

And fun fact, “Carrots can turn green or blue in the cake if the baking soda reacts oddly,” Ly said. “It looks wild, but it’s totally safe to eat — like a trippy dessert experiment.”

Shruti Doctor, owner of the Salted Butter Society, offers a take on carrot cake that uses a variety of spices to make fresh carrots truly sing. “Carrots are such a beautiful vegetable, and I wanted them to shine more with the spices in this cake,” she said.

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