

Photo: Gary Caldwell

BAKING & DESSERTS Marcus Bar & Grille

Marcus Bar & Grille's burnt sugar cake

By Sarra Sedghi · Rough Draft Atlanta, 2/24/2026

Ingredients

SYRUP

- [ ] 1 cup granulated sugar
- [ ] 1 cup boiling water

CAKE

- [ ] 1 cup softened butter
- [ ] 2 cups granulated sugar
- [ ] 4 large eggs
- [ ] 3 cups cake flour
- [ ] 1 Tbsp baking powder
- [ ] 1/2 tsp salt
- [ ] 1 cup whole milk
- [ ] 1/2 cup burnt sugar syrup
- [ ] 2 tsp vanilla extract

FROSTING

- [ ] 1/2 cup butter
- [ ] 1 cup brown sugar

Directions

1. **Make the syrup:** Melt sugar over medium heat. Allow sugar to become a dark amber, then remove from heat. Carefully add boiling water and slowly stir pan until smooth.
2. Return to heat. Simmer 3 to 5 minutes. Cool completely. Reserve 1/2 cup of syrup for cake and 1/2 cup for frosting.
3. **Prep the cake:** Heat oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit and grease three 8-inch cake pans. Cream butter and sugar, beating 3 to 5 minutes, until light and fluffy. Add eggs one at a time, mixing well after each.
4. Whisk dry ingredients. Add dry ingredients and milk alternately into batter. Finish mixing batter, then mix in burnt sugar syrup and vanilla.
5. Divide batter among cake pans, preferably using a 3-ounce scoop. Aim for 15 scoops, or 45 ounces, per cake pan.
6. Bake 25 to 30 minutes, until done.
7. Let cool completely before frosting.

> Note: Caldwell encourages using your judgement based on your home oven and production flow. A temperature of 325 degrees Fahrenheit will work better for a convection oven or slower bake.

- [ ] 1/2 cup burnt sugar syrup

The story

This week, Chef Gary Caldwell shares the recipe for Marcus Bar & Grille's burnt sugar cake. Burnt sugar cake, a predecessor to caramel cake, is a historic Black Southern dessert dating back to the 19th century. The cake is also deeply rooted in Caldwell's own family history.

Caldwell grew up in Raceland, Louisiana. The community is home to the Raceland Raw Sugar mill, one of the oldest operating sugar mills in the United States. Caldwell's father worked at Raceland for 30 years and often brought home pure, uncut (first grind) sugar straight from the mill.

First grind sugar is essentially what the mill ships to sugar companies for processing, and is not available at stores. Before sugar cane is ground, it's burned, resulting in a lightly smoked aftertaste.

Caldwell's family used first grind sugar for everything, including the burnt sugar cake his aunt prepared for holidays and special occasions. While you may not be able to procure first grind sugar, you can replicate the taste using burnt sugar syrup.

"My sous chef [Megan Brent] was the one who reminded me of the recipe. I came back from visiting my dad for his 70th birthday and brought back some first grind sugar and she got inspired," Caldwell said, equally crediting Brent with the restaurant's version of the recipe.

"As long as I can remember, [this recipe has] been handed down over generations," he added of his personal connection to the cake.

And you can order a slice of burnt sugar cake at Marcus Bar & Grille on Edgewood Avenue through April 4.

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