

# SKETCHES IN THE BANNER



Recently, in a telephone conversation with Linda Desmond, typesetter for the *Journal*, I mentioned having difficulty in deciding upon a topic for this issue. She volunteered that she liked the column on apple butter and added "Give us more apple butter." (See Volume 4, Number 2). That article had been inspired by the holiday season, and having just distributed petite fruit cakes as holiday gifts, I'll tell you about the recent evolution of the recipe I used.

Let's suppose your situation is this. The *idea* of fruit cake appeals to you; it is, after all, traditional holiday fare and they *are* festive in appearance. You and your family have never enjoyed the heavy, moist texture of the fruit cakes you've sampled, not even the blue ribbon winners at the county fair. You cannot justify the expense and effort of baking fruit cakes because of their festive appearance alone, so you have a dilemma. The easy solution is to firmly declare—as many do—that fruit cakes (or anything else you've decided you don't like) are overrated, aren't worth the effort, are too expensive, etc. and you might even look with disdain upon those who enjoy them. The more creative way, and happily for Society many also take this course, is to use your abilities as a domestic scientist: decide what you don't like in the fruit cakes you've sampled, identify those qualities you do like and be sure to emphasize those, invent innovations of your own and otherwise experiment. Since fruit cake is usually made only at holiday time, it may be several years before you have perfected a family tradition.

Let's further suppose you live on a farm in the Mid-west of the U.S.A. You have available, free for the taking, black walnuts, hickory nuts, hazel nuts, cherries, currants, etc. You also have a number of children who are just the right age to harvest these commodities and prepare them for baking (and, incidentally, in the case of black walnuts this involves a rather considerable amount of time and effort). And, enjoying the flavor of nuts, you decide to feature them, that is, your fruit cake will have more nuts than fruit.

But, what about the texture? Was there a reason, originally, for the moistness of the cake? Did it serve a function that isn't important to you? In what ways can you eliminate the unwanted heaviness? If increasing the amount of leavening isn't the course you want to pursue, do you have another option?

You realize, perhaps subconsciously, that doing something about the texture requires a re-thinking of the concept of the batter. You identify that it's essentially a combination of wet and dry ingredients. If one reduces the amount of batter and incorporates its two components separately, will this achieve the desired effect. So, you try it and discover that it does! You now have a fruit cake which is mostly nuts and fruit with just enough batter to hold the really tasty ingredients together. In effect, the nuts and fruits are glazed with the batter in the same manner, more or less, that puffed popcorn grains are stuck together with the sorghum molasses glaze in the popcorn balls for which you are so well known. You even wonder if this, subconsciously, is from whence the idea came.

As the years pass and the family matures, you lose that source of labor. You find it expedient to use purchased nuts and discover that almonds and Brazil nuts are wonderful too. Some of the children leave the area, even as far away as Arizona.

But hickory trees do not in sunny Arizona grow. Nor are hickory nuts or black walnuts readily available for purchase, so the traditional family recipe becomes modified with further substitutions: pecans for hickory nuts, English walnuts for black walnuts, raisins for currants, purchased candied fruit, etc.

Perhaps this anecdote of the evolution of a recipe for fruit cake will remind us that family traditions are modified with changes in circumstances. So, too, traditions within a larger cultural setting are far from static, changing with time and circumstances, as Jan Timbrook pointed out so well (see Volume 4, Number 2:143-144).

W.V.