

Wedding Cake

A Slice of History

SINCE ANTIQUITY, weddings customarily have been celebrated with a special cake. Ancient Roman wedding ceremonies were finalized by breaking a cake of wheat or barley (*mustaceum*) over the bride's head as a symbol of good fortune. The newly married couple then ate a few crumbs in a custom known as *confarreatio*—eating together. Afterwards, the wedding guests gathered up the crumbs as tokens of good luck. The Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius, in *De Rerum Natura (On the Nature of Things)*,¹ wrote that the breaking of the cake over the bride's head mellowed into crumbling the sweet wheat cakes over her head. After all the cakes were used up, the guests were supplied with handfuls of *confetto*, a sweet mixture of nuts, dried fruit, and honeyed almonds. These sweetmeats were an important part of the wedding banquet and continued to be so for hundreds of years. Chronicles of the period record that in 1487 over two hundred and sixty pounds of “confetti” were consumed at the banquet following the wedding of Lucrezia Borgia and Alfonso d'Este, son of Ercole I, Duke of Ferrara. Sweetmeats were showered over the bride and groom; indeed, it seems to have been the custom to throw the sweetmeats about enthusiastically. Eventually, the sweets were replaced with rice, flower petals, and colored paper, and these new types of confetti continue to be showered over the happy couples around the world. When the Romans invaded Britain in A.D. 43, many of their customs and traditions became part of British life. The Norman invasion of 1066 subsequently incorporated many French traditions into British life. Other changes came about due to increased trade and contact with Europe, but our present-day wedding traditions remain firmly rooted in the past.

In medieval England, in an early form of wedding cake, small spiced buns were stacked in a towering pile, as high as possible. If the bride and groom were able to kiss over the tall stack, it augured a lifetime of prosperity. The earliest British recipe specifically noted for a wedding is Bride's Pye, recorded by Robert May in the 1685 edition of *The Accomplisht Cook*.² This was a large round pie with an elab-

orately decorated pastry crust that concealed a filling of oysters, pine kernels, cockscombs, lambstones (testicles), sweetbreads, and spices. There were also humbler, less expensive versions containing minced meats or just mutton.

In the county of Yorkshire, bride pie was the most important dish at weddings, as it was considered essential to the couple's future happiness. It consisted of a large round pie containing a plump hen full of eggs, surrounded by minced meats, fruits, and nuts and embellished with ornate pastry emblems. Each guest had to eat a small piece of the pie; not to do so was considered extremely rude and impolite. A ring was traditionally placed in the pie, and the lady who found it would be the next to marry. Bride pie was still being served at weddings in some parts of England as late as the nineteenth century.

In the seventeenth century bride pie developed into bride cake, the predecessor of the modern wedding cake. Fruited cakes, as symbols of fertility and prosperity, gradually became the centerpieces for weddings. A much less costly bride cake took the simpler form of two large rounds of shortcrust pastry sandwiched together with currants and sprinkled with sugar on the top. Very few homes at the time could boast of an oven, but this type of pastry cake could easily be cooked on a bakestone on the hearth.

In east Yorkshire bride cake was a small cake offered to the bride upon arrival at her new home. After eating a small piece, the bride threw the remainder over her head to ensure that she and her new husband would want for nothing. The groom then threw the plate over his head. If it broke, the couple's future happiness and good fortune were assured.

Other superstitions have long been connected with wedding cakes: Sharing the cake with family and friends increases fertility and prosperity. The bride who bakes her own cake is asking for trouble. A taste of the cake before the wedding means loss of the husband's love (while a piece of cake kept after the big day ensures his fidelity). The newlyweds must cut the first slice together. And every guest must eat a small piece to ensure that the happy couple are blessed with children.

Another Yorkshire tradition was to have the bride cake waiting at a nearby inn. The cake would be marked into small squares but not cut all the way through. The groom would place a linen napkin over the bride's head and then break the cake over her. As the cake fell, the guests scrambled for their portions. As in ancient Roman times, a piece of the cake guaranteed an auspicious life. Another old Yorkshire custom was to cut the bride cake into little pieces, throw them over the heads of the happy couple, and then pass any smaller pieces through the bride's wedding ring. Bride cake contained various charms with different meanings, such as a silver coin, a ring, a button, and a thimble. The guest who received the slice containing the coin was assured of future prosperity, while the ring meant marriage within a year. The recipient of the button was destined for lifelong spinster- or bachelorhood; the thimble similarly foretold an old maid or bachelor. When the bride's (and the groom's) cakes were cut into pieces for the bridesmaids and groomsmen, it was traditional for the maid of honor to select the first piece of cake. The other attendants followed, each hoping to find a special charm that would foretell their future.

Matrimony cake, another Yorkshire specialty, was more like a pie than a cake, being a pastry case filled with a mixture of dried fruits, apples, spices, and breadcrumbs. It may have descended from the bride pie, with the omission of the hen, eggs, and meat, much as modern fruit mincemeat evolved from the original mincemeat containing shredded mutton or beef. With its solid base, smooth filling, and rough top, matrimony cake was said to sum up the complexities of marriage.

In the seventeenth century wedding cakes were made in pairs, one for the bride and another for the groom. Groom's cake, a dark, heavy fruitcake, was served alongside bride cake. Smaller than bride cake and usually not iced, the groom's cake was cut up into little squares that were then placed in boxes for the guests to take home as a wedding memento and to ensure good luck. At bedtime the recipient of groom's cake would place the square underneath his or her pillow. This tradition was recorded as early as the seventeenth century but gradually died out, as did the groom's cakes, which are no longer part of British weddings. However, the tradition has undergone a revival in the United States, where for many years the groom's cake has served as a wedding favor for guests. Modern groom's cakes are often shaped and decorated to depict the groom's favorite hobby—a golf bag, a camera, a chess board.

Bride cake covered with white icing first appeared sometime in the seventeenth century. It was frosted with the

precursor of royal icing, a sort of meringue mixture of whisked egg white and sugar, which was applied to the hot cake straight from the oven and then returned to the oven to firm up. When applied to wedding cakes, this type of icing was known as "bliss." In 1769 Mrs. Raffald (the most celebrated English cookery writer of the eighteenth century after Hannah Glasse) was the first to offer the combination of bride cake, almond paste, and royal icing.³ Hannah Glasse, in *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*,⁴ gave a recipe for the cake that included four pounds of flour, thirty-two eggs, six pounds of dried fruit, and half a pint of brandy. After the cake was baked, it was covered with a pure white, smooth icing made with "double refined sugar," egg whites, musk, ambergrease [*sic*], and orange-flower water. The mixture was beaten for two hours, then spread over the cake and dried in the oven until hard. This drying process required constant vigilance to ensure that the iced cake did not color or scorch.

Sugar had been imported to England since the Middle Ages, but by the 1540s it was more readily available and affordable in cones of varying quality, weighing from five to forty pounds. By the 1550s two English sugar refineries were in operation; by 1650 there were at least fifty refineries in London alone. "Double refined" sugar was twice-refined white sugar; powdered icing or confectioners' sugar was unknown at that time. References to "powdered sugar" refer to granulated sugar that had been pounded fine and sifted through fine gauze or silk. Elizabeth David, in *English Bread and Yeast Cookery*, notes that caster and icing or confectioners' sugars became common only in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Triple-refined sugar had an especially white tint and was consequently more expensive.

A pure white color was much sought after, as white icing on a wedding cake symbolizes purity and virginal attributes—a notion first put forward in Victorian times. Before then most bride cakes were white for a more practical reason. Because the ingredients for the bride cake were expensive, especially the sugar for the icing, white icing meant that only the finest refined sugar had been used. Thus a pure white cake was a status symbol, a display of the family's wealth.

At Queen Victoria's wedding to Prince Albert in 1840, white icing was used to decorate her cake, and this icing has been known as "royal icing" ever since. The multitiered cake—which by the nineteenth century had gradually acquired the name "wedding cake"—measured more than nine feet in circumference. The *London Times* of February 1840 described the cake in detail. On the second tier, which was supported by two pedestals, a sculpture of "Britannia" gazed upon the royal couple as they exchanged their vows,



For description see opposite page.

while at their feet sat a dog, symbolizing faithfulness, and two turtledoves, symbolizing purity and innocence. There were also several sculpted cupids, including one happily writing the date of the wedding onto a tablet.

The wedding cake that commemorated the marriage of Queen Victoria's eldest daughter, Vicky, in 1858 was less elaborate. Only the bottom tier consisted of cake; the others were made of sugar icing and were purely decorative, one stacked directly on top of the other. The now-traditional multitiered British wedding cake—a grand affair of heavily fruited cake layers decorated with royal icing and embellished with sugar flowers, doves, horseshoes, and bells—had its origins in the wedding cake made for the marriage of Prince Leopold in 1882. For the first time guests could enjoy

Above: Bride, Christening and Other Cakes. From Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management, 1888, p.1129.

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a wedding cake made entirely of cake. This cake was also tiered, with each tier comprised of an iced cake stacked rather like a succession of hatboxes. The icing in between had been allowed to harden to prevent the upper tiers from sinking into the lower layers. However, it was to take another twenty years before the tiers of wedding cakes would be separated by columns (often disguised pieces of a broom handle). And it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that the tiers were separated and supported by columns of hardened icing. These tiered cakes symbolized

prosperity and were a status symbol at society weddings, as the less well-off could not afford a pillared and tiered wedding cake.

When Princess Elizabeth (now Queen Elizabeth II) married Prince Philip in 1947, the official wedding cake stood nine feet high and weighed five hundred pounds. It was made by McVitie and Price, using ingredients received from Australian Girl Guides as a wedding gift. One tier was used on the wedding day; one was kept until the christening of Prince Charles; and a third was dispatched back to Australia, to the guides who had thought of the Queen.

British wedding cakes remained virtually unchanged from the elaborate Victorian creations until the 1980s, when the intricately piped royal icing began to be replaced by soft icing, draped and frilled and often embellished with sugar-paste flowers. At the same time simpler, American-style layer cakes, such as carrot cake with cream cheese filling or key lime coconut cake with lime curd, came into vogue. Today, there are practically no rules about wedding cakes in Britain. Contemporary cakes can be any of color, flavor, or shape, and the possibilities are endless: a dense, dark chocolate cake with a sumptuous filling; gold, silver, and white iced cakes stacked and decorated to look like a pile of wedding presents; a tower of individual desserts; or a plain, moist sponge cake simply iced and decorated with fresh or sugar flowers. Twenty-first-century weddings are big business for Britain's £3.5 billion wedding industry. This year over three hundred thousand people are expected to tie the knot, with the average wedding costing an astonishing £12,000. The cost of the all-important wedding cake averages around £300, but of course that depends on the size and design. Wedding cakes, like the bride's dress, are subject to the vagaries of fashion, and celebrity weddings and cake designers continually strive to set new trends.

THE FOLLOWING RECIPES hail from the English county of Yorkshire and date from before World War II. Some variations include dates or are made with dried fruit alone. The precise origin of these recipes is unknown; these versions are my own. ©

Yorkshire Matrimony Cake

8 ounces pie pastry
 4 tablespoons breadcrumbs
 4 tart green apples, peeled and cored
 4 tablespoons mixed currants, raisins, sultanas
 ½ teaspoon ground ginger
 ½ teaspoon grated nutmeg
 2 tablespoons brown sugar
 2 tablespoons golden syrup
 Juice of 1 lemon

Divide the pastry into two pieces, one twice as large as the other. Roll out the larger piece and ease it into an 8-inch tart pan. Slice the apples and arrange on the pastry base. Sprinkle the rest of the ingredients over the apples. Roll out the remaining pastry and lay it on top, sealing the edges well. Bake for about 40 minutes at 350°F until the pastry is golden. Serve warm or cold with whipped cream.

Matrimonial Cake

This cake keeps very well in an airtight tin.

4 ½ ounces rolled oats
 3 ounces flour
 2 ounces light brown sugar
 3 ounces butter
Filling:
 8 ounces chopped dried dates
 1 heaping tablespoon light brown sugar
 5 ounces water

First make the filling: cook the dates gently with the sugar and water until they form a soft paste. Leave to cool.

Mix together the oats, flour, and sugar and rub in the butter until crumbly. Put half this mixture into a buttered 8-inch square pan and press down firmly. Spread with the date paste and scatter the remaining crumble mixture over the top. Bake for 15 to 20 minutes at 350°F until golden. Cut into squares while hot and leave to cool in the pan.

NOTES

1. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things: De Rerum Natura*, Anthony M. Esolen, trans. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).
2. John May, *The Accomplisht Cook, Or The Art & Mystery of Cookery* (London: printed for Obadiah Blagrave, 1685; repr., Prospect Books, 2000).
3. Elizabeth Raffald, *The Experienced English Housekeeper* (Manchester: Printed by J. Harrop for the author, 1769; repr., Southover Press, 1997).
4. Hannah Glasse, *The Art of Cookery, Made Plain and Easy* (London: 1747; repr., Prospect Books, 1983).