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Gingerbread with Lemon Sauce

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*“Booker T. Washington spent nine years of his life confined to a tobacco plantation in the Virginia piedmont, but he went on to become a noted author, orator, and founder of the Tuskegee Institute. In his autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, a vivid retelling of his upbringing in a cabin that doubled as the plantation kitchen house and the sweet potato bank, he described his passion for ginger cakes: “I saw my two young mistresses and some lady visitors eating ginger cakes . . . those cakes seemed to me to be absolutely the most tempting and desirable things that I had ever seen; and I then and there resolved that, if I ever got free, the height of my ambition would be . . . to eat ginger cakes in the way that I saw those young ladies doing.”*

*African American cookbooks also carry on the ginger cake tradition—from the “old-time ginger cake” Abby Fisher baked in 1881 to author Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor’s gingerbread in the 2001 cookbook *Vertamae Cooks in the Americas’ Family Kitchen*. Verta dedicated the recipe to Booker T. Washington in a 2001 NPR interview to celebrate June 19, 1865. Juneteenth, as the day is known, is the day that the enslaved in Texas learned that the Emancipation Proclamation had set them free.*

The essentials for gingerbread are usually the same: flour, butter, sugar, eggs, spices, and molasses baked until dark and lovely. You can experiment with sweeteners such as cane syrup, maple syrup, honey, and sorghum molasses, or try moistening the gingerbread batter with different liquids, such as coffee, milk, or buttermilk. Despite the name, gingerbread’s mahogany crumb is light and cakelike, not at all dense like pumpkin, banana, or other quick breads.

*This is my version of the recipe, developed with chef Joe Randall, which we published in *A Taste of Heritage: The New African-American Cuisine*. It is sweet and moist, fragrant with the scent of ginger and the distinctly bold flavor of molasses. Serve this gingerbread with a dollop of sweet Bourbon Chantilly Cream or a light garnish of warm Lemon Sauce.”*

Serves 12-15

INGREDIENTS

Butter or shortening for the pan
2½ cups all-purpose flour, plus extra for the pan
2 teaspoons baking powder
1 teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons ground ginger
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
½ teaspoon ground cloves
1 cup molasses
1 cup boiling-hot coffee
1 stick (4 ounces) butter, melted
½ cup packed dark brown sugar
2 large eggs, beaten
Lemon Sauce or Bourbon Chantilly Cream (recipes follow), for serving



(continued)



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PREPARATION

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Lightly coat a 13 × 9-inch baking pan with butter or shortening. Dust with flour, tapping out the excess.
2. In a bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt, ginger, cinnamon, and cloves. In a bowl or measuring cup, stir together the molasses and coffee.
3. In a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, beat the melted butter, brown sugar, and eggs on medium speed until light. Beat in the flour mixture in three additions, alternating with the coffee molasses mixture, beginning and ending with the flour mixture. Scrape down the sides of the bowl, then beat for 30 seconds longer.
4. Pour the batter into the pan. Bake until a wooden pick inserted in the center comes out clean, 30 to 45 minutes. Cool the gingerbread in the pan on a wire rack, then cut into squares and serve warm with lemon sauce or bourbon Chantilly cream.

Lemon Sauce

makes about 1 cup

½ cup sugar

1 tablespoon cornstarch

1 cup boiling water

2 to 3 tablespoons butter (to taste), cut into pieces, at room temperature

Grated zest and juice of 1 lemon

½ teaspoon vanilla extract

Pinch of salt

In a small saucepan, whisk together the sugar and cornstarch until well mixed. Gradually whisk in the boiling water. Bring to a boil over medium heat, then reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer until the sauce is thick and resembles syrup, about 5 minutes. Add the butter, lemon zest, lemon juice, vanilla, and salt, and stir until the butter has melted. Cool to room temperature to serve.

Bourbon Chantilly Cream

makes about 2 cups

1 cup heavy whipping cream

2 teaspoons powdered sugar, sifted

2 teaspoons bourbon

In the chilled bowl of an electric mixer with chilled beaters, whip the cream to soft peaks. Sprinkle in the sugar and beat until blended, no more than 30 seconds. Add the bourbon, beating until stiff peaks form. Do not overbeat.