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Let Us Eat Cake

One woman's obsession with cakefood by Amy Halloran



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I don't know when I fell in love with cake. In a family picture, I stare at the lit candles on my birthday cake while my grandmother smiles at me. Was I wearing a crown? Or was the cake the crown, the shining candles playing the part of jewels? Whatever the case, I'm sure I was already long captivated by cake, held in the shine of icing even when it arrived at the table candle-free, no celebration attached.

Eventually, I became the family baker and baked cookies and cakes for snacks and school lunches. I moped when my father wouldn't buy me an Easy-Bake Oven at a garage sale, even though I used the real oven all the time. The boxes of cake at my friend's house fascinated me. The cake mixes seemed like magic, more magic than the cakes I made from big boxes at home. I loved to watch the little puffs rise in the oven. It was disappointing, however, when the promise of the cake was so quickly gone.

Though I made most of my cookies from scratch, I didn't make a cake from scratch until I joined 4-H. It was a domestic sciences club, rather than an animal sciences club, and the first cake we, the 4-H Clovers, made as a group was a German Chocolate Cake. The first cake I made at home was a Bonnie Butter Cake from Betty Crocker's red cookbook, a premium I bought with some family cash and a bunch of pieces of box tops. I could not believe the difference between that cake, so velvety in crumb, and the mixes! The magic of the boxes, big or small, appealed to me no more; the magic of butter, creamed with sugar and puffed with eggs, did.

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My love for cake, for the idea of it and the transformative promise of the whole thing and each bite, has developed over the years. By the time I was in my twenties, I couldn't bear to have someone else bake my birthday cake. I was too invested in my hope for what it should taste like to entrust that hope to someone else. I remember the year someone convinced me to let her buy a white cake with whipped cream frosting for my birthday. The cake itself was too light, and too sweet, and the whipped cream had way too much sugar, too. I can still taste how that cake did not meet my expectations.

And yet, baking my own birthday cake is not satisfying either. Birthdays are high holidays. I think the birthday girl or boy should get a week off from financial and household responsibilities to rejoice in the fact of being alive. That week should not include cake baking, but I hate bought cakes. I feel like a drudge, and a bit of a compulsive maniac, making my own cake. Each year I consider the bakers and bakeries I know and wonder who might be able to meet my demands. And I remember the keen short-fallings of past birthday cakes, and go to the kitchen.

Last year, when I turned forty, I was about ready to hand in my oven mitts. I was a big girl, so I thought I could finally let someone else handle the cake. Besides, I wanted a big party for family and friends, so I let my sister buy the cake from Debbie's Kitchen, a great sandwich and sweet shop in Albany, New York. I talked to Debbie myself, describing an almond pasty pound cake affair with a thin chocolate coating. I love Debbie's baked goods and figured that she could deliver the taste of love I wanted. Then my aunt died and her wake was the night of the party, so we cancelled.

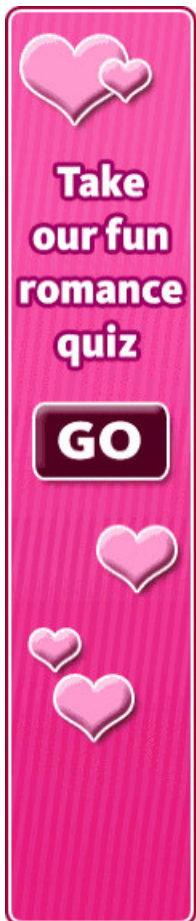
Now I'm about to be forty-one. I think I want to re-schedule the party and of course I'm tempted to make the cake. But there is a problem in making my own cake, more than the grudging feeling of working for my own celebration. Throughout my life I've courted people with cake. In anticipation of certain friends' birthdays, I read cookbooks for weeks, thinking of which recipes I could alter and combine to best honor the salutee. I wanted the cake to be a material expression of my connection to this person. Cake baking is almost like church to me, I suppose, and the cake becomes like communion. This is heavy-duty baggage to set on a bunch of sugar, flour and fat.



I was raised Catholic, but the church I went to was very Vatican II. Very hippie. We sang Happy Birthday to Jesus on Christmas and had a big cake with candles. I made my first communion at a wedding, and didn't get the hint that I was eating Jesus' body FOR REAL until I read Flannery O'Connor. I thought the unleavened bread we broke was just bread we shared, a symbol of the Last Supper and Jesus' wishes that we share things together and all be friends. I had no clue that communion was meant to be Communion, some kind of strange and impossible connection to the body that went up on the cross lo those many years ago.

But at the risk of offending anyone who believes the facts I missed, I think I almost feel this way about cake. When I bake cake, I bake love. It's a way for people to eat my heart out. I bake bread and I cook meals for my family and friends daily, but I mostly put work into those efforts, not a lot of heartfelt thinking. I put my heart and soul into cake. I don't think I could give that much of myself to food every day, which brings me back to the conundrum of my birthday cake.

How can I put my heart into my own cake? Perhaps this is related to low self-esteem, and I should spend the rest of the year examining my motivations on a pricey sofa. Or maybe the issue is simpler. On birthdays we are supposed to absorb the love other people feel for us. And maybe my need to bake my own cake is related to big fat intimacy issues. Could it be that I can't let people show how much they love me? Ah, enough speculation. It is time to bake, and eat, a lot of cake.



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