

Cake love in the land of gulab jamun

Illustration by Cheyenne Olivier

It was the day before Christmas. Waiting for a bus in Metiaburuj, the decrepit remains of what was once a very prosperous Muslim neighbourhood, I noticed an elderly man in a skull cap sitting on the crumbling sidewalk selling cakes out of a basket. He had hand-written in Bangla, *Plam Cake* 9 rupees, *Christmash cake* 8. My bus arrived and I never got to ask him what made the *Plam* cake more special.



Abhijit Banerjee

TASTING ECONOMICS

I have always treasured that memory as an example of the unique place of Christmas in urban (and perhaps even rural) Indian culture. Those cakes were clearly not for some cosmopolitan elite from the city's more prosperous areas. They were meant for the local, mostly poor, Muslim population who, with the rest of the city's Hindus, Muslims and the small minority of Christians, were going to celebrate Christmas by eating cake.

Christmas of course is many things in India; celebrated with great solemnity with a midnight mass at the cathedrals, with proper global tackiness in every shopping mall around the country (enormous glittery Christmas trees, heaps of palpably synthetic snow, even the occasional Santa, sweaty under his unseasonable costume), with turkey dinners at the fancy hotels, but most universally, by eating cake.

But the reach of cake goes well beyond Christmas. Go to the average kirana store in the middle of nowhere and first thing that strikes you is just how empty it is: a few batteries, pens and light bulbs, some candy, a few bags of chips and other savouries. And cakes, and their close cousins, biscuits.

We Indians consumed 1.6 lakh tonnes of packaged cake this year, worth rough-



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ly Rs 4,000 crore and spent about twice that (a billion dollars) on *Parle-G*. That is close to 100 rupees for every man and child, just on those two.

Chips I understand. Salt and fat, that's a winning combination everywhere. But *Parle-G*? Or its equally ubiquitous cousin, *Marie*, the empress of bland. And for that matter, cake? We are not talking about some Molten Chocolate Lava Cake, waiting to explode on your spoon, nor a fruit dense liquor-soaked Christmas cake, but it's very distant cousin, a pale yellow mound of flour, sugar, shortening, some eggs, a few drops of industrial vanilla essence,

bits of preserved orange or lemon peel, and that wonderful Indian concoction, maraschino "cherries" made from *karonda*. What accounts for its universal appeal in the land of the gulab jamun, that emblem of excess?

Cheap and durable is, of course, a big part of the answer. Five rupees buys very little these days, but a small pack very little these days, but a small pack of *Parle-G* is among them. And when it is 50 degrees in the shade, it might be one of the few things that refuse to wilt.

But that tells us very little about why it is cake and biscuits that we like. Unfortunately, modern economics has tended to shy away from understanding

preferences, on the dubious grounds that otherwise we would have to deal with the fact there are racists and other people who have nasty views. Economists pass the buck, instead, to evolutionary biology, which is premised on the idea that we only eat things because they make us stronger or more fecund. There is no place in their theories for the fact that we live in a society with its own expectations and rituals, that we eat and drink in part as a way to deal with the rest of our lives. We offer *mithais* on Diwali to connect, to see the smile spread across the child's face as she bites into it, but also a little bit to avoid that awkward conversation with her parents. We overindulge at Christmas because it's been a long year of many ups and downs and it is very nice to finally let go, even if it is just for a day. We fast at Ramzan to feel a part of the community, especially at a time when everything else might be drifting apart.

With cakes and biscuits there is always also a reference, ironic or not, to that other way of celebrating — with candles and lights and booze, but also a degree of formality and restraint, that we associate with our erstwhile colonial masters. Ishwar Gupta, the mid-19th century Bengali poet, was so struck by the way the "English New Year" is celebrated that he wrote a poem about it in 1852, where he rhymes "take, take, take" with "a hundred cakes".

And perhaps it is that contrast with the all-embracing over-the-top-ness of our celebrations that attracts us to the domesticated cake, which is companionable in a way that a gulab jamun can never be. You can crumble it gently and nibble the crumbs absent-mindedly — it does not mind. There is no risk of syrup being spurted all over your clothes and it brings pleasure while never being insistent enough to pull your mind away from work or love.

This is part of a monthly column by Nobel-winning economist Abhijit Banerjee illustrated by Cheyenne Olivier

CHRISTMAS CAKE RECIPE

Here is a recipe for the Christmas cake I usually bake for my wife's family get-together just outside Paris. It has a lot of dried fruits, but the recipe emphasises dates, figs, prunes, walnuts, candied lemon and orange peel, which combined with the rum, the spices and the go-slow on sugar, gives the cake an almost savoury feel, ideal for snacking in little morsels all through the holiday.

- Place 200 gm of black and golden raisins in a large bowl along with 150 gm of candied lemon or orange peel, 100 gm dates, 100 gm prunes, 100 gm dried figs and 150 gm walnuts, all chopped to the size of raisins (feel free to change the combination to suit your taste) and pour 1.5 cups nice rum over them, pressing down on the fruits to get the most coverage from the rum. Cover tightly and leave it for a week (or longer) turning the fruit over once a day. This is just for flavouring — none of the alcohol will remain in the cake once its cooked.
- Cream 250 gm of softened unsalted butter with a 150 gm of brown sugar (you can use stevia here, but given just how much sugar is in the fruits, you shouldn't let that fool you — just eat less). Beat in 4 eggs and 2 tsp vanilla essence. Mix 200 gm almond flour and 50 gm regular flour (or just regular flour) with 2 tbs freshly grated lemon or orange zest, 1 tsp each of baking soda and baking powder, ½ tsp each of salt, ground cinnamon, ground cloves, ground cardamom and ¼ tsp of ground nutmeg and black pepper. Drain the fruits and toss in the flour mixture, making sure that the fruit does not clump up. Mix into the butter mixture. Mix well, taking the necessary time, and making

your arm muscles count (I spend 10 minutes). The key is to make sure that there is no clumping, and the mixture should be quite heavy by now. Pour into a buttered 9" by 9" baking tin (or equivalent) with the bottom covered with two sheets of baking paper and bake in an oven that was preheated to 200 reducing the temperature to 150 when you put the cake in. The baking usually takes me 2 hours and a bit but it depends on the oven (convection helps).



Check from time to time and cover with aluminium foil once the top is a nice brown. Take it out when a toothpick inserted into the cake comes out clean.

- If you like your cake frosted, make a simple cream cheese frosting by creaming together 125 gm softened unsalted butter, 250 gm cream cheese and 300 gm of sugar (at this point you have given yourself up to full decadence for a day), ¼ tsp salt and 2 tsp lemon zest. Lather it over the cake after it's fully cooled.
- If you like your cake even more boozy, make it a week in advance, skip the frosting and "feed" the cake with 2 tbs rum every day for that week and keep it wrapped in foil. The rum will mostly evaporate, so think of other options if you want to get tipsy.

Home bloody home: Living

him to cancel the agreement after they got to know that a woman had been murdered in the Pali Hill apartment they had just moved into.

Lipstick on your collar?