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Welcome Russian Winter with Persimmon Spice Cake

A rich cake for cold winter day.

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Cyclone Sara blew through Russia this week, bringing with her the first serious snowfall of the season. This is always cause for Russians to celebrate, jubilantly greeting one another, "to the first snow!" nd there is something undeniably magical about watching the first snow of the season sift itself over the darkling world like a light dusting of powdered sugar over gingerbread, and then blanket it in pure white silence. t remains one of the most beautiful natural occurrences in the rolling year, and each season, we welcome the delicate snowflakes back as long-lost friends, forgetting in our excitement about the accompanying treachery of icy sidewalks or lethal ice shards that hover above, clinging to the eaves but always in danger of melting just enough to crash down upon us.

Pushkin's passionate heroine of "Yevgeny Onegin," Tatiana Larina, "... with a Russian duty

/That held her heart, she knew not why/ Profoundly loved, in its cold beauty, /The Russian winter passing by." This love of winter runs deep in the Russian psyche, a passion inherited from generations of peasant ancestors, who spent so much of their lives preparing for winter, through back-breaking labor in the fields.

The season may be dark and cold, but it is also a time for leisure and rest from the intense agricultural labor of the other three seasons. Russian peasants spent much of their winter holed up in their izbas, or huts, clustered around the commodious pechka or stove, which stood at the epicenter of every dwelling, no matter how humble. The pechka served the dual function of oven and stove and was the primary source of heat throughout the winter, save for domestic and farm animals, who added additional warmth.

The frailest family members — the elderly and very young — made their beds on top of the stove, but if they spent most of the winter in a semi-somnolent state, for the hardy, younger members of the household, winter was a time of intense merriment, including sleigh rides to visit one another, and "bundling," a social pastime when young men and women wrapped up in quilts and gossiped, and probably groped one another when an elderly chaperone nodded off in the steamy heat of the crowded izba.

At the first snowfall, the modern-day descendants of these Russian peasants haul out their fur coats and sheepskin coats, elegant garments that lend them glamor and gravitas for the duration of the season. They don their sturdy boots and crunch the ice under their feet, as they make their way through the snow-covered streets, their paths illuminated by bright (often garish) holiday lights and decor, which are now a fixture of urban life in the Russian Federation. But no New Year's garland of fairy lights can eclipse the subtle beauty of a light dusting of snow on gleaming gold domes, or the stark contrast of pastel-colored buildings set against nature's blank white canvas.

This is the season of dark afternoons warmed by hissing samovars and steaming glasses of aromatic tea. And these require a cake, so here is one. This is a thick, chewy, spicy persimmon-flavored cake, that almost has the dense structure of gingerbread. Its intense flavor comes from a panoply of spices, chopped walnuts and candied ginger. This is a sturdy, filling, stick-to-your-ribs type of cake that is easy to assemble, fail-safe, and the perfect thing to come home to after a long walk through the snowy streets: the smell of it baking will instantly make any house feel like home. I use persimmon purée in this cake, but you could also use applesauce. Serve it plain, with just a dusting of powdered sugar, or add a dollop of ice cream, whipped cream, or the yogurt and persimmon purée I suggest below. Enjoy!

Persimmon Spice Cake

Ingredients

- 3 cups (710 ml) all-purpose flour
- 1 ¾ (415 ml) cups sugar
- 1 tsp ground cardamom
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 1 tsp ground ginger
- ½ tsp ground cloves
- 1 tsp baking soda

- ½ tsp salt
- 1 cup (230 ml) chopped walnuts or pecans
- 1 cup (230 ml) chopped crystalized ginger
- 3 cups (710 ml) persimmon purée, divided
- 2 cups (460 ml) Greek yogurt, divided
- ¼ cup (60 ml) vegetable oil
- ¼ cup (60 ml) melted and cooled salted butter
- 3 eggs
- Non-stick cooking spray
- Icing sugar

Instructions

- Whisk together 1 cup (230 ml) persimmon purée with 1 ½ cups (350 ml) Greek yogurt. Decant the mixture into a clean glass jar and store, covered, until you are ready to serve the cake.
- Preheat the oven to 325°F (160°C).
- Prepare a standard-size Bundt cake pan or 9-inch springform pan by spraying it liberally with non-stick cooking spray.
- In a large mixing bowl, whisk together the flour, sugar, cinnamon, ginger, cardamom, cloves, salt, and baking soda. In a smaller container, whisk together the yogurt, purée, beaten eggs, and vegetable oil.
- Add the wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and whisk gently to combine. Fold in the walnuts and crystallized ginger and melted butter. Do not over mix.
- Pour the batter into the prepared pan, then rotate it briskly several times to dislodge any air bubbles. Bake for 50-60 minutes until a toothpick inserted in the middle comes out clean. Let the cake cool in its tin for 15 minutes, then ease it carefully from the pan and set to cool completely on a rack for 2 hours.
- Sift icing sugar on top or glaze as you wish. Serve with the yogurt and persimmon mixture.

Recipe adapted from "Southern Living"

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