

# taste<sup>of the</sup> south

## Festive Desserts



## A Very SOUTHERN Christmas

**family**  
favorites

**115**

recipes & gifts  
from your  
kitchen

  
vanilla pound cake  
with peppermint glaze

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taste of tradition  
**fruitcake**

The grande dame of a Southern Christmas

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FOOD STYLING BY AIMEE LINDSEY / PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN O'HAGAN





FRUITCAKE HAS BEEN PART OF MY HOLIDAYS SINCE childhood, when we celebrated Christmas on my maternal grandparents' Piedmont North Carolina dairy farm. Every Christmas, my grandmother baked a fruitcake and a fresh coconut cake not only for her family but for each of her daughters' families as well. But by the time I was really paying attention, she had gone from making her own to buying Ann Page fruitcakes, the house brand at the A&P grocery store. Dry and crumbly, they were under-provisioned with the crimson cherries I adored. A baptism with sherry, bourbon, rum, or blackberry cordial could have helped, but as a lifelong Southern Baptist, she didn't go that route.

I also remember the fruitcakes my father and his fellow Kiwanis Club members sold during the holiday season. Cellophane-wrapped in long, slender blocks, their visible cross sections revealed ample portions of pecans and candied cherries. These suited me nicely, holding me over until I became a fruitcake devotee and maker.

I fell in love with fruitcake one November while teaching seventh-grade English. To help my students settle down after lunch, I read to them from *A Christmas Memory*, Truman Capote's luminous short novel about his childhood years spent with an elderly cousin known as Miss Sook. These two unlikely bakers made thirty-some fruitcakes each November, mailing them around the country to people they admired. To make the cakes, they gathered windfall pecans in a ramshackle baby carriage, cracked the nuts by the fireplace, and then anointed each cake with whiskey obtained from a speakeasy by the river. Their baking marathons stirred Capote's mind three decades later, and he wrote about them. His story moves me each time I read it.

My passion for cooking and history sent me searching for fruitcake's story, a meander through colonial American kitchens to our legacy of British baking traditions. Dark fruitcake classically contains molasses and brown sugar; walnuts and almonds; raisins, currants, figs, and prunes; and an abundance of spices including cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, mace, and allspice. White fruitcake, my favorite version, is a pound cake studded with pecans, candied pineapple, and glacéed cherries.

Fruitcake isn't for everybody. Its extended, century-spanning run has not happened because we all love it, but because, like candy canes and Christmas carols, it tunes us in to a holiday-memories channel. We can stay there and make an old-school fruitcake or tune in to a new one, dreaming up a 21st-century version with dried mango, cherries, cranberries, and macadamia nuts. Whether you



love fruitcake or hate it, here's hoping that every mention of it this year makes you smile and that your holidays are as sweet as glacéed cherries. 🍷

## a special fruitcake tradition

My friend Bill Smith, chef of Crook's Corner in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, has a deal with his friend Elizabeth Karmel, also a North Carolina native and executive chef of Hill Country Barbecue in New York City. Elizabeth travels to Greensboro, North Carolina, each autumn to make fruitcake with her mother. For dinner, they drive over to Crook's Corner, where Bill shares his bounty of wild persimmons—delivered to the kitchen door by Miss Andrews, who gathers them on her rural Orange County home place. Elizabeth always gives Bill a fruitcake from the previous year that has been preserved the old-fashioned way, in cheesecloth with apricot brandy. Then, Elizabeth and her mother head back to Greensboro, full of Bill's good cooking and with plenty of ripe wild persimmons in tow to make fruitcakes. Of course, Bill gets a fresh fruitcake, too.

To read more fruitcake memories from Southern chefs and food writers, visit [tasteofthesouthmagazine.com](http://tasteofthesouthmagazine.com).

*Nancie McDermott is the author of 10 cookbooks, including **Southern Cakes: Sweet and Irresistible Recipes for Everyday Celebrations** (Chronicle Books, 2007) and **Southern Pies: A Gracious Plenty of Pie Recipes, from Lemon Chess to Chocolate Pecan** (Chronicle Books, 2010). She is a contributing editor for *Edible Piedmont* magazine and lives with her family in Chapel Hill.*

