

King Cake

By Nancie McDermott



*King Cake is a seasonal delight, enjoyed from the Feast of the Three Kings, or Epiphany, on January 6th, throughout Carnival season, ending in Mardi Gras. The “King” refers to the Magi, or the Three Kings, who traveled for twelve days in search of Baby Jesus. Baked in a ring-shape to resemble a king’s crown, King Cake is a feature of Carnival season, celebrated throughout the world, and with special energy and delight in New Orleans and South Louisiana. People in Carnival-celebrating locales tend to buy their King Cakes, since they go through lots of them over the weeks of the season. But you can make one at home and fix it up the way you like it. You’ll need a feve — a good-luck trinket to tuck inside. Use a pecan, an almond, or a dried lima bean; or check on google to order the traditional trinket: a tiny plastic baby. This recipe is adapted from **American Cooking: Creole and Acadian (Time-Life Foods of the World Series)**, Edited by Peter S. Feibleman. Time-Life Books, 1971.*

For the Cake:

½ cup lukewarm water (110 to 115 degrees)
2 packages active dry yeast (about 4 ½ teaspoons)
2 teaspoons plus ½ cup granulated sugar
3 ½ to 4 ½ cups all-purpose flour;)plus up to ¾ cup more as you knead)
2 teaspoons salt
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon (or nutmeg)
1 teaspoon finely grated lemon zest, or orange zest (optional)
½ cup lukewarm milk (110 to 115 degrees)
5 egg yolks. beaten well
8 tablespoons very soft butter, cut into ½ inch bits (1 stick, 4 ounces)
Plus 2 tablespoons very soft butter
1 shelled pecan half, or 1 whole almond, or one uncooked dried lima bean

To glaze the cake before baking:

1 egg
1 tablespoon milk

For the Icing

Colored icing sugar in Purple, Green, and Yellow/Gold
OR

1 ½ cups granulated sugar
Food coloring: Purple (or Red + Blue); Green; Yellow
2 cups sifted confectioners' sugar
2 tablespoons lemon juice or orange juice plus 1
tablespoon milk, or 3 tablespoons milk

Part 1: To make the cake:

Turn the oven to 250 degrees F. When it reaches that temperature, let it heat for 10 minutes. Then turn it off. (This is to warm it enough to use when you are ready to let dough rise.)

Pour the lukewarm water into a small, shallow and sprinkle with the yeast and the 2 teaspoons of granulated sugar. Stir to mix well — don't worry if the yeast doesn't dissolve completely, mostly is fine. Set aside to rest and bloom, while you prepare the flour mixture.

In a large mixing bowl, combine 3 ½ cups of the flour, the remaining ½ cup of granulated sugar, the salt, the cinnamon, and the grated lemon zest. Stir with a whisk or a fork to mix well. Mound up the flour and then scoop out a well in the center of the bowl. Pour in the puffed-up yeast mixture; the lukewarm milk, and the egg yolks.

Using a large wooden spoon, a large metal spoon, or a spatula, stir and scrape and mix to bring the ingredients together into a very very soft dough; really more of a batter. Add the very soft butter bits, about a tablespoon at a time, and stir and press against the sides of the bowl to incorporate butter into the batter. Stir and scrape until evenly mixed in.



Add another half cup of flour and stir to make the batter into a very soft dough, which is quite sticky but holds its shape. Add a bit more flour, holding back, adding as little as possible, working it into a very soft, less sticky dough.

When it holds its shape in a very, very soft ball or lump, and is more dry than sticky, (Keep your hands floured as you work, to discourage the sticky dough from sticking to you) Turn it out onto a floured cutting board or counter top.

Push down with the heels of your hands, pressing it forward and folding it back on itself. As you knead, add flour by the tablespoonful or two. Work for 3 to 5 minutes, turning and scraping, adding flour very parsimoniously as you go. When your dough is soft, springy, dry, let it rest while you prepare the bowl.

Grease the inside of a large mixing bowl generously, with the remaining softened butter or with vegetable oil. Place the dough in the bowl, and then turn it to coat it with the butter. Cover the bowl with a kitchen towel, and place it in the warmed oven, leaving the door ajar. (Or place it in another warm place in your kitchen where it can rise.) Let stand for 1 ½ hours, until the dough has risen to twice its original size and looks dry on top and puffed up.

Punch the dough down with a big gutsy punch: POOF!!!!. Let it deflate and then turn it out on the counter and knead it gently, a turn or two. Divide the dough into two parts, to make two rings. Or leave it to make one gigantic ring. Set out a large baking tray or a cookie sheet for each ring (one large one or two smaller ones), lined with baking parchment and greased well with butter, (a half-sheet pan), about 11 x 17 or larger. Or simply grease the pan with butter, without parchment.

Shape one portion of dough into a long plump cylinder, parallel to the edge of the counter. Make it about 20 inches long. Place it on the greased baking parchment and shape it into a big open ring, pushing it out to the edges. Leave the center wide open — it spreads as it rises and bakes.

Tuck your *feve*, nut or bean) into the dough near the bottom, hidden from view. If you have a plastic baby, **wait!** Add it to the cooled cake, pushing it in from the bottom. Plastic and ovens don't mix.



If you make one large ring, make it an oval so you will have more space on the pan. Oval king cakes are traditional as a way to serve more people with one great big cake. Cover the shaped ring with the kitchen towel and return it to the warmed oven to rise for 45 minutes more. (Reheat the oven briefly if needed, while the pan waits outside the oven).

When the cake has risen nicely, remove it from the oven very gently and set aside. Heat the oven to 375 to baked the cake. While it heats, very gently brush the risen cakes with the egg-milk

mixture. Use a pastry brush, or the back of a spoon and take care not to press down and deflate the cake. When the oven is at 375 degrees, place the cake in the oven and bake for 25 to 30 minutes, checking and turning it to help it brown evenly. When it is golden brown and shiny, remove from the oven and let cool to room temperature before icing. If you forgot the feve or if you are using a tiny plastic baby, you can add it now.

Part 2: To make the icing and decorate the cake:

Sugars:

For the colored sugar, set out the prepared icing sugar. Or make colored sugar by pouring ½ cup sugar into a medium bowl. Add 3 or 4 drops of food coloring to the bowl. Using the back of a large spoon, press, mash, mix, and stir to soften the food coloring and mix it into the sugar evenly and well. (For purple, use equal amounts of red and blue, and keep increasing until you get a pleasing purple.) Or combine the food coloring and sugar in a pint-sized glass jar. Seal tightly and shake well. Stop to stir with a fork or a spoon, and shake until evenly colored to the shade you want. Add more food coloring a few drops at a time, until you like the color you have. If too dark, add more sugar. (Keep icing on hand in jars – it keeps well for several months.)

Icing:

For the icing, combine the confectioners' sugar with the lemon juice and milk in a large mixing bowl. Use a whisk or a fork to mix them together until you have a smooth, shiny, rich and pourable glaze.

Finishing the Cake:

To decorate and complete the cooled cake, place it on a cooling rack over a cookie sheet to catch icing as it oozes down the sides. Use a large spoon, a ladle or a whisk. Dip it into the pourable icing and then spoon, drizzle, or slather icing all over the surface of the cake. Smooth it together with a spatula or leave it wild. Quickly sprinkle on colored sugars, in stripes alternating in rows; in three big color patches, thick or thin — it's your King Cake! (You can also divide the icing into three bowls, color each one, and use it to decorate the cake. If you choose this method, consider doubling the icing recipe amount so you have lots to work with. Let stand for 15 minutes to set. Transfer to a serving platter and serve at room temperature.

Makes one enormous or two (approximately 10-inch) cakes.