

Sugar High

It was a life-changing dessert: one chef's delectable slice of American Coconut Layer Cake. Two decades later, Jeffrey Steingarten is still trying to bake it himself. Photograph by Bruce Weber.

From the day I was born until the autumn of 1991, I baked only one cake. Cakes seemed pointless, bulging, huge, and bloated. They delivered so little sensory pleasure compared with their incalculable calories, their massive weight and volume, their off-the-chart glycemic index. Cakes were effeminate, woman's work, and surely politically incorrect.

And then, in 1991, I was introduced to the Queen of Cakes. We were walking into a restaurant I'd been wanting to try, K-Paul's New York Kitchen, the short-lived outpost of pioneering Louisiana chef Paul Prudhomme, whom I greatly admired. A woman who had just finished dinner stopped us and, with a wide smile, shared the news: "They've got the coconut cake tonight! There's only one piece left—you'd better claim it right away." Which we did, and near the end of an uneven meal, we were brought a vast wedge of ivory and gold. I tasted it twice, then called for more forks, and in the blink of an eye, our kilogram of cake had vanished.

It had apparently begun life as six disks of yellow cake, each one moistened with a coconut syrup and slathered with a thick layer of sweet white filling. Then the disks were stacked up tall and covered from top to bottom with a fluffy white frosting and dusted with sprinkles of fresh coconut. Later I would learn that many cakes native to the American South are enriched with what one cookbook quite unromantically terms a soaking solution, a glaze that is brushed on the surface or poured over it. And it was not unusual that the filling between the layers was not identical to the icing on the top and sides.

What an elaborate production, each molecule in it calculated to give exquisite gustatory pleasure. I needed to possess it, to make it mine. I began telephoning K-Paul's early the next morning and reached the chef several hours later; he couldn't give me the recipe until he spoke with Prudhomme's HQ in New Orleans. I nagged him without mercy until he called them and reported, "They say the recipe's right out of *The Prudhomme Family Cookbook*."

The days that followed were busy with shopping, with the compounding of glazes, filling, frostings, syrups, and batters.

COCONUT DREAMS

The retrieval of coconut meat from the shell, called for by many cake recipes, can be a long and painful process.



The Prudhommes insist upon fresh coconut, and those of us without long experience may, as I did, find the retrieval of coconut meat from its adamantine and ligneous shell to be a long and painful challenge from which one rarely emerges without the spilling of blood.

If the baking had gone well, I would have worn these battle scars with pride. But it didn't. Our idea was to bake three thick cake layers, then slice each of them crosswise for a total of six. But the layers didn't rise much at all and resembled pancakes in the end; splitting them in two required microsurgery. The culprit was undoubtedly a can of exhausted baking powder. Some of the chemicals in baking powder are expected to react with one another to produce carbon dioxide after they're heated in the oven, but they can apparently also react at room temperature, slowly and continuously, on the shelf in your pantry or supermarket, until there's no gas left to make all those little bubbles that aerate a cake and convert it from a biscuit into a cloud.

Sure, our failure was but an accident, yet somehow, whatever the cause, it was our Waterloo, our Battle of the Little Bighorn, and we had lost the will to spend another three days replicating the project. We were still convinced, as are so many bakers and cake lovers, that Southern American Coconut Layer Cake is indeed the Queen of Cakes. And so every once in a while, in the years that followed, we tried a new formula. The most promising of them and thus the most deeply tragic was a fine recipe from Brenda Cooper of South Carolina, the cousin of an old friend of mine. It was a warm day, and we had reached the final steps, stacking up the layers and slathering generous gobs of sweet, creamy filling in between. Then, as we were swirling icing over the very top, we noticed that the layers were not stacked as evenly and neatly as we had thought, and that they were shifting, imperceptibly at first and then really, really perceptibly, the top two layers threatening to slide off. Before we could act decisively, they carried out their threat, and although I lunged to catch them, all five layers and their icing and syrup and filling plopped to the floor. It all happened so fast.

And yet, once we had scooped up several handfuls of cake scraps from the floor and tasted them, and saw how delectable they were, we realized that we had come quite close to creating a perfectly iconic Southern American Coconut Layer Cake. Only our exhaustion, physical and psychological, kept us from trying again the next day, the next week, or even the next month.

In the meantime, our spirits were lifted by signs that cake had become less politically incorrect. In my view, cake's connection with Marie Antoinette had always been the chief drag on its prestige. But the truth is emerging that Marie never, ever said, "Let them eat cake" when she was informed that the peasants were starving for lack of bread. Here are the facts: (1) The legend is based on an anecdote in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's autobiographical *Confessions*, which he wrote in 1766, when Marie Antoinette was only ten and living in her native Austria; (2) Rousseau attributed the remark not to Marie but to

an unnamed "great princess," who has since been identified as having lived 100 years earlier; (3) Lady Antonia Fraser, in her biography of Marie Antoinette, quotes from a letter Marie wrote to her family back in Austria that expresses unmistakable compassion for the peasants' plight, which all demonstrates how out of character such a cruel remark would have been.

In any event, Rousseau's quotation was "Qu'ils mangent de la brioche": "Let them eat brioche." There was no mention of cake. The French, in fact, have no precise word for our rotund, fluffy, tall American cakes, which did not exist until baking powder was invented in the mid-1800s. Did Rousseau's first English translator twist "brioche" into "cake"? My investigation at the New York Public Library was inconclusive, and the Library of Congress search engine was broken. I found the e-mail address of a distinguished elderly scholar, a retired professor and Rousseau translator at a leading Southern university. It was late at night by this point, and after several inconclusive e-volleys, he left our chat, saying that he was afflicted with a gravely anemic condition, that his red blood cells were dangerously dwindling, and that he needed to climb back into bed. I was grateful nonetheless.

As you can tell, I've been boning up on cakes, reading widely and deeply, baking a few practice layers here and there, and confecting a tentative quart or two of frosting—all as mere calisthenics in my training for a bold and final assault on the summit, the Kanchenjunga of American cake-baking, the Southern American Coconut Layer Cake! Yes, the moment of challenge had arrived once again. And

at my side, a Sherpa Tenzing Norgay to my Sir Edmund Hillary (if you'll permit me to switch mountain peaks), was my assistant, Elise, who has shown an amazing and, frankly, unanticipated facility for generating cakes with a fecundity traditionally attributed to rabbits.

I fearlessly decided to start on square one; that is, to begin with flour, water, air, and fire, and create the universe from there. Plus sugar and eggs and a little dairy. And don't

forget the coconut. We followed an elaborately detailed plan. First we reminisced about the dreamiest American Coconut Layer Cakes we had ever tasted. We wrote down the reasons for our high regard, and these became our tentative criteria, our standards for cake excellence. Then we purchased a half-dozen American Coconut Layer Cakes that had garnered the highest recommendations (in print, in person, online) and sampled and rated them all, while refining our criteria.

To some readers, especially those in the mental-health professions, all this may seem excessive—obsessive, compulsive, depressive, even geeky. But as we will soon come to appreciate, they couldn't be in more serious error.

We agreed that the ideal Classic Southern American Coconut Layer Cake has six or more cakey layers and six or more gooey layers; that the cakey parts should be tender and fine-grained; and that the upper third of each layer should be nearly as moist as pudding. Nearly every element should have a wonderful coconut taste (preferably without the help of coconut extract). The icing should be white, creamy, fluffy, neither runny nor sticky nor stiff.

So the baking commenced. If I had not already discovered Elise's hidden talent, I would have limited us to six recipes, but Elise proved indefatigable. We baked the cake layers first and rated them; then whipped up eleven icing recipes and took notes; then finally applied the icings to the cakes. Within three days there were Classic Southern American Coconut Layer Cakes everywhere, all shiny in their snowy frostings.

Some of them were two layers tall and some were three; some were virginal white, inside and out; and some were a rich yellow. Some cakes had coconut—shredded or chopped, toasted or raw—sprinkled onto or pressed into their icing. Some of the icings tasted of nothing but sugar. Some had the flavor of marshmallows because they started out as meringues with lots of egg whites, which are the mother of marshmallows. Several had the tang of cream cheese, which when whipped up with butter and sugar makes for a popular white, generic, nice-tasting frosting. Most had no coconut taste at all. Some cake layers were dry and some were as moist as pudding; some were aerated with tiny bubbles and some with large, indelicate bubbles. Some were tender and some were tough.

Halfway through our baking, I telephoned the Peninsula Grill in Charleston and inquired about their celebrated Ultimate Coconut Cake, which I had tasted on my previous trip to the city. It weighs twelve pounds (enough for 24 servings of dessert) and costs \$100 plus \$97.62 for overnight shipping. It arrived the next day, and yes, it was in pristine condition—deeply frozen and just barely waking from cryo-hibernation, like the spaceship crews in *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Alien*. Sure, we gouged off little troughs of frosting with our fingertips, but we would have to wait another two days to eat the cake fully defrosted. So there it sat, atop the Roto-Broil 400, rotund and self-important, a monument to Southern baking, vaguely reminiscent of the Jefferson Memorial as seen from the rear.

In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that every horizontal surface in and near our kitchen (not counting the floor and ceiling) was laden with Classic Southern American Coconut Layer Cakes on round white platters. To our great surprise, my adolescent bitch Jesse evinced an immediate weakness for cake, which forced us to move our productions to horizontal surfaces high off the ground, such as the top of the refrigerator.

It was time for the showdown.

In the end, none of the cakes we baked ourselves lived up to our memories, our hopes—but when we finally cut ourselves some slices of the cake from Peninsula Grill, we agreed that it was close to the best we'd ever tasted. A day later, at room temperature, the Peninsula Grill Ultimate Coconut Cake had reached its prime, and it stayed there for 48 hours. Its flavors and textures had merged and melded, the filling and frosting were light, nearly fluffy, and its grain was delicate and tender. We never needed to slice another full wedge from the cake, because everybody who passed by the Roto-Broil 400, even some relative strangers, helped him- or herself to an extravagant forkful of it. In this way, the entire cake, all 28,000 calories of it, disappeared within 36 hours. Twenty-eight thousand!

And now we were *cogido* on the horns of a dilemma. The notion of creating the ideal Southern American Coconut Layer Cake from scratch—that is, from vials of hydrogen, oxygen, and carbon—had proved to be an impossible dream, and perhaps a truly stupid one. Unlike savory cooking and even bread baking, the baking of sweet things is much like chemistry. Small alternations can be disastrous and rarely a source of gladness. Beginning with a good recipe that can generate a family of fine offspring is the best way to start.

If I had tried to reverse-engineer the Peninsula Grill's cake, I might have ended up somewhere on the positive side of approximate. Instead, I appealed to my friend Lou Hammond (whose firm does Peninsula Grill's public relations) to intercede on my behalf and wangle the actual recipe, and a few days later Elise was busy at the stove. The results were good enough but paradoxically not paradisaical, and

I doubt it was Elise's fault. OK, maybe it was. But what she produced did not stack up against Peninsula's mail-order creation or my treasured memories of the original amazing cake from K-Paul's New York Kitchen. Had I idealized it? Was I doomed to disappointment?

Thus it was that I asked Elise to shop for and prepare the components of the Prudhomme family's creation, which I hadn't approached since my devastating failure 21(!) years earlier. It had been, after all, only the second cake I had ever attempted. Maybe, just maybe, we had gained enough experience and wisdom in the course of baking 40 cakes that success would be ours.

First, we altered the recipe in various places—to stanch the bloodshed, for example, we substituted frozen grated coconut from Thailand for the fresh. Following Shirley Corriher's general findings in *BakeWise*, we added homemade whipped cream to the batter to increase the cake's tenderness, and it worked! And then. . . I sense that you are perched on the edge of your seat, and so let's leap ahead to the climax, to our very happy ending: It was the finest coconut cake we had ever made and the best either of us had ever tasted. You'll find the fabulous (and lengthy) recipe on Vogue.com.

And if you wonder, What does our Classic Southern American Coconut Cake go with best?, the answer is . . . nothing! It goes with nothing. Not coffee or milk or any alcoholic beverage. Maybe a few sips of water every now and then to keep yourself from choking. Contemporary, up-to-date desserts are expected to be (1) moderate or less in sweetness; (2) sweetened with honey or brown sugar or fruit concentrate or maple syrup, but never with that deadly, toxic sweetener known as white sugar; (3) balanced in flavor between sweetness and acidity (from tart fruit or sweet vinegar). Our classic coconut cake is none of these. It is unalloyedly sweet and as white as a leukocyte. It is not contemporary or up-to-date, and yet it is perfect and unimprovable, unequaled. □

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