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 ef-feminizing, 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 Prudhomines insist upon fresh coconut, and those of us who have long experience may, I daresay, limit us to six recipes, but in her biography of Marie Antoinette, quotes from a letter wrote to her family back in Austria that expresses uncomfortable compassion about the cooks to the cake. Within those three days there were Classic Southern American Coconut Layer Cakes everywhere, all smoky in their snowy frostings. Some were tall and some were three; some were virginal white, inside and out; and some were a rich yellow. Some cakes had coconut frosting, some were toasted or raw—sprinkled onto or pressed into their skin. Some of the icing was melting vanishingly. Some had the flavor of marshmallow toxins with the addition of eggs, which are the brother of marshmallow toxicity. I was pouring cream cheese, which when whipped up with butter and sugar makes for a popular, white, crunchy, not-well-done frosting. Most had to 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, indecipherable bubbles. Some were tender and some were rough.

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) and costs $300.00 ($97.32 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 spacemen crews in 2001: A Space Odyssey. So there it sat, atop the Roto-Brill 400, rotund and self-important, a monument to Southern baking, vaguely reminiscent of the Jefferson Memorial as seen from the rear.

So the baking commenced. If I had not already discovered Else, I might have limited us to six recipes, but Else proved inconspicuous. We baked the cake layers first and iced them; then whipped up eleven icing recipes and took notes about their relative consistency and peeliness to the cakes. Within those three days there were Classic Southern American Coconut Layer Cakes everywhere, all smoky in their snowy frostings. Some were tall and some were three; some were virginal white, inside and out; and some were a rich yellow. Some cakes had coconut frosting, some were toasted or raw—sprinkled onto or pressed into their skin. Some of the icing was melting vanishingly. Some had the flavor of marshmallow toxins with the addition of eggs, which are the brother of marshmallow toxicity. I was pouring cream cheese, which when whipped up with butter and sugar makes for a popular, white, crunchy, not-well-done frosting. Most had to 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, indecipherable bubbles. Some were tender and some were rough.

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In the meantime, our spirits were lifted by signs that our 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 Antoinette 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 anecdoté in Jean-Quen Rouessel's autobiographical Confessions, which he wrote in 1786, when Marie Antoinette was only ten and living in her native Austria; (2) Rouessel attributed the remark not to Marie but to an unnamed "great princess," who has since been identified as Marie Leszczyńska, wife of Louis XV, who visited the court of Queen Marie Antoinette in 1781; (3) Marie Antoinette wrote to her family back in Austria that expresses uncomfortable compassion about the cooks to the cake. Within those three days there were Classic Southern American Coconut Layer Cakes everywhere, all smoky in their snowy frostings. Some were tall and some were three; some were virginal white, inside and out; and some were a rich yellow. Some cakes had coconut frosting, some were toasted or raw—sprinkled onto or pressed into their skin. Some of the icing was melting vanishingly. Some had the flavor of marshmallow toxins with the addition of eggs, which are the brother of marshmallow toxicity. I was pouring cream cheese, which when whipped up with butter and sugar makes for a popular, white, crunchy, not-well-done frosting. Most had to 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, indecipherable bubbles. Some were tender and some were rough.

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In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that every hori- zontal surface in and near our kitchen (not counting the floors and cabinets) is Classical Southern American Coconut Layer Cakes on round white platters. To our great surprise, our adolescent bishop Jesse evinced an immediate weakness for it, and he has taught us to move our productions from our standards for cake excellence. Then we purchased a half- dozen American Coconut Layer Cakes that had garnered the highest recommendation (in print, in person, online) and sampled and rated them all, while refining our criteria.

To some readers, especially those in the mental-health pro- fession, this may seem a pointless exercise in frivolity; I agree 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 hours. Its flavor and textures had merged and melded, the filling and frosting were light, nearly flaky, and its crumb was delicate and tender. We've tasted many of them, and this is the one that I feel is the most full aliment from the cake: I'm not sure who the maker was, but it was the overall winner. I feel it. I ate the entire cake, all 28,000 calories of it, disappeared within 36 hours. Twenty-eight thousand thousand...