RICH CHRISTMAS CAKE

My traditional, rich Christmas cake has plenty of fruit. The more fruit there is in a cake, the longer it will keep, as the sugar in the fruit helps preserve it. When you’re beating together the butter and sugar, don’t overbeat, as this introduces too much air into the mixture. Once the cake is put into the hot oven, the air expands, and if you’ve overbeaten, the cake will rise too much and the fruit will fall down.

For the cake, you will need:

225g (8oz) raisins
225g (8oz) sultanas
150g (5oz) glace cherries, chopped coarsely
110g (4oz) ready-soaked dried apricots, finely chopped
110g (4oz) mixed peel, chopped
25g (1oz) crystallised ginger, finely chopped
½ tin strawberries, drained (see note)
Zest of ½ lemon and ½ orange, finely grated
3 tablespoons whisky
110g (4oz) blanched almonds, chopped
110g (4oz) ground almonds
250g (9oz) white flour, not self-raising
½ teaspoon each ground nutmeg, ground cinnamon and ground cloves
225g (8oz) butter, at room temperature
225g (8oz) brown sugar
4 large eggs, at room temperature

Note:

Drain the juice off the whole tin of strawberries and use half of the fruit that’s left — a very small amount.

For the icing, you will need:

350g (12oz) ground almonds
225g (8oz) caster sugar
110g (4oz) icing sugar
1 large egg yolk, organic and free range
1 tablespoon lemon juice
1-2 tablespoons whisky
¼ teaspoon vanilla essence
¼ teaspoon almond essence
Apricot jam, softened 1-2 packets of instant royal icing
Christmas-cake decorations, to serve

Use a round cake tin, 23cm (9in) in diameter, or a square, 20.5cm (8in) tin. Grease the inside of the tin with butter and then line it with a double layer of baking parchment. Greasing will help keep the lining paper in place. Put the raisins, the sultanas, the coarsely chopped glace cherries, the chopped, ready-soaked dried apricots, the mixed peel and the crystallised ginger in a bowl.

Then add the drained strawberries, the finely grated lemon and orange zest, and the whisky. Stir everything well, then cover the bowl and leave the mixed fruit to stand overnight to mellow and plump. If you are really short of time, pop the covered bowl of fruit into the microwave on high for one minute, stir, and then repeat for another minute. This will plump up the fruit. Then transfer the fruit to a cold bowl to help it cool down faster.

The next day, or when the fruit has cooled, stir the chopped, blanched almonds and the ground almonds through the mixture. In a bowl, sieve together the white flour, the ground nutmeg, ground cinnamon and the ground cloves. In a separate bowl, beat the butter to soften it a bit and then add the brown sugar and beat until soft and creamy. Make sure you don’t overbeat, especially if you are using an electric mixer.

Beat in the eggs one at a time to the butter-and-sugar mixture, adding a spoon of the flour-and-spice mixture with each egg. When all the eggs have been added, stir in the remaining flour-and-spice mixture by hand. The finished mixture should be soft, but stiff enough so that it will drop off a wooden spoon when the spoon is shaken gently. If the mixture is too soft, then add an extra spoon of flour.

Be cautious, though: if too much flour is added, the finished cake is liable to develop a crack on the top. Now add in the fruit mixture, stirring gently but thoroughly. Then spoon the prepared cake mixture into the greased, lined cake tin and spread it out evenly. Preheat the oven to 170°C, 325°F, Gas 3.

Set a fan oven 10 degrees lower, or follow the manufacturer’s instructions. If you’re using an electric oven, put a small ovenproof bowl of water into the oven during baking to prevent the cake from drying out. This is not necessary in a gas oven, as gas gives off some moisture as it burns.

Put the cake in the centre of oven. Bake it for about 1½ hours until the cake looks set. It is important not to open the oven door during this stage. Once the cake has a set look, though it may appear quite pale, you can reduce the heat to 150°C, 300°F, Gas 2, and then bake it for a further 1-2 hours. Ovens vary, so it is necessary to use your own judgement about the temperature and time. When the cake looks nice and golden, test that is is cooked through by pushing a skewer into the centre.

If, when you remove the skewer, it has any dough-like bits attached to it, cook the cake for a little longer and then check it again. If necessary, cover the whole top of the cake with a piece of foil — ensure the foil rests on the baking parchment and not on the surface of the cake.

Once it has cooked, stand the cake, still in its tin, on a wire tray and let it cool. Sprinkle a little whisky over the top. When the cake is completely cool, sprinkle a little more whisky on top. Remove the tin, but leave the baking parchment on the cake and wrap it in tin foil. Store in a cool, airy place until you are ready to ice it.

To make the icing:

Mix the ground almonds, the caster sugar and the icing sugar together. In a separate container, whisk together the egg yolk, the lemon juice, the whisky, the vanilla essence and the almond essence. Add enough of the egg-yolk mixture to the almond mixture to make a stiff, moist paste, mixing well. Gather into a ball.

To serve the cake, carefully remove the lining paper. Place the cake on a cake board that is 5cm (2in) wider than the cake. Brush the top and sides with the softened apricot jam. Roll out the almond icing on a board that has been dusted well with caster sugar, rolling out the icing larger than the top of the cake. Place the almond icing on the cake and, using a table knife, spread and tease it down the sides. The almond icing will be thinner on the sides than it is on top. Make up the instant royal icing and spread it over the whole cake, patting with a palette knife to give the effect of snow. Decorate with Christmas-cake decorations. Leave to set. If you like, you can put the cake — still on its board — into a large, see-through plastic bag, such as a turkey roasting bag, and this will keep it fresh and free from dust until you’re ready to eat it.