The Perfect Christmas Cake...

This is my favourite Christmas cake recipe – I’ve modified it over the years and consider it to be perfect – a rich moist fruitcake that improves with keeping.

Not everyone is confident about making a Christmas cake – probably because we only bake them once a year. Often recipes have a telephone directory’s worth of ingredients – along with the contents of half an off-licence. The resulting cake is confused, tasting of everything, usually dry, having been baked for three or four hours, and is often far too sweet.

My recipe is sugar-free, as I prefer the deeper toffee flavour and sophistication of dark treacle with a honeyed oomph. Personally, I can’t stand marzipan and Royal icing, although marzipan can disguise a multitude of sins, potholes and cracks. My mum’s Christmas cake always sank in the middle. The embarrassing hollow had to be filled with marzipan, stuck to the cake with melted apricot jam.

Royal icing, like snowy peaks brought up with the flat of the knife resembling a badly artexed kitchen. Personally, I prefer to brush with sieved apricot jam and decorate with glace fruits. Alternatively, I arrange split almonds and glace cherry halves in a pattern over the top of the cake – just before it goes in the oven.

Paul’s Christmas Cake

150g sultanas
150g raisins
150g currants
150g halved glace cherries
100g cut mixed dried peel
500ml apple juice
175g self-raising wholemeal flour
175g self-raising white flour
2 tsp mixed spice
6 tbsp (90ml) sunflower oil
3 tbsp clear honey
2 tbsp dark treacle
250ml Guinness
2 eggs beaten
50g toasted hazelnuts – smashed up a bit

Place the sultanas, raisins, currants, halved cherries and mixed peel in a bowl and stir in the apple juice. Cover and leave to soak overnight.

Pre-heat the oven to 160ºC. Grease and line a deep round 20cm cake tin. Secure with string and triple folded brown paper around the outside.

Sift the flours into a mixing bowl together with the mixed spice and make a well in the centre.
Put the sunflower oil in a bowl, stir in the dark treacle, honey and Guinness. Now add to the sifted flours.

Drain the dried mixed fruit from the apple juice. Discard the apple juice. Add the mixed fruit to the cake mixture. Add the beaten eggs and toasted hazelnuts; thoroughly mix all the ingredients together.

Turn the mixture into the prepared tin and smooth the surface. Bake for two hours or until a skewer comes out clean. Transfer to a wire rack until cold, then lift out of the tin and remove the paper.