

A BIG AND BOOZY CHRISTMAS CAKE

butter – 350g, at room temperature
soft dark brown sugar – 350g
dried fruits – figs, prunes, apricots, candied peel, glace cherries, 1 kg in total
eggs – 5 large free range
ground almonds – 100g
shelled hazelnuts – 150g
vine fruits – raisins, sultanas, currants, 500g in total
brandy – 5 tablespoons, plus extra to feed the cake
the zest and juice of an orange and a lemon
baking powder – half a teaspoon
plain flour – 350g

You will also need a 24cm cake tin with a removable base. Line it with buttered greaseproof paper, which should come 5cm above the top of the tin.

Set the oven to 160°C. Beat the butter and sugar till pale and fluffy. This is much easier in an electric mixer but we have always done it by hand – dedicated cooks do get sweaty. Don't forget to push the mixture down the sides of the bowl from time to time with a spatula. When the butter and sugar have turned to a cappuccino-coloured fluff, cut the dried fruits into small pieces, removing the hard stalks from the figs. Add the eggs to the mixture one at a time – it will curdle but don't worry – then slowly mix in the ground almonds, hazelnuts, all the dried fruit, the brandy and the citrus zest and juice.

Now mix the baking powder and flour together and fold them lightly into the mix. Scrape the mixture into the prepared tin, smoothing the top gently, and put it in the oven. Leave it for an hour, then, without opening the oven door, turn down the heat to 150°C and continue baking for two hours.

Check whether the cake is done by inserting a skewer – a sharp pointed knife will do – into the centre. It should come out with just a few crumbs attached but no trace of raw cake mixture. Take the cake out of the oven and leave to cool before removing from the tin.

We like to make our Christmas cake a couple of weeks in advance and then ply it with alcohol to keep it moist and boozy. Brandy is the spirit we use, because we think its flavour works well with the fruit, but whisky would work, too. To get the booze into the cake, we pierce the underside deeply with a knitting needle, skewer, or thin screwdriver, then pour a little brandy into the holes. We wrap the cake tightly in greaseproof paper and then in foil or clingfilm and place it in a large container. Covered, it will be fine for several weeks. To get moist, flavour-some, but not too brandy-soaked results we feed the cake every three or four days for two weeks.

