

Holiday spice

While our food columnist's past experience making a gingerbread house didn't turn out as planned, it inspired him to make a winter-themed gingerbread cake

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Gingerbread cake

INGREDIENTS

2 cups all purpose flour	2 large eggs
1 tsp baking soda	Zest of 1 lemon
¼ tsp salt	½ cup molasses
1½ tsp ground cinnamon	1 cup milk
1 tsp ground ginger	1 pint whipping cream
⅛ tsp ground cloves	1 pomegranate
1 stick unsalted butter	Powdered sugar (optional)
½ cup light brown sugar	

I was 7 years old when I attempted to build my first (and only) gingerbread house. It was the last day of class before winter break, and my teacher handed us a Ziploc bag with all the necessary foundations and decorative items for a gingerbread house. Mine didn't turn out too well — it was over-frosted, the walls caved in and the roof collapsed. I'm pretty sure more of the candied toppings made it into my mouth than as a garnish for my abysmal creation.

But whenever I think of the holidays, this moment comes to mind. The bold, bright colors along with the sweetness of the gingerbread and its complementary assortment of toppings stand out to me.

That experience is what inspires this holiday dish: a gingerbread cake topped with pomegranate seeds, encapsulating the warmth, sweetness and aesthetic of any holiday meal.

The gingerbread's zesty flavor is almost more apparent as it takes on a fluffier consistency, and the spice level is elevated. There is a lot more forgiveness when it comes to the amount of spices you can add to the cake batter, so if you're a stickler for cinnamon, this recipe is for you. The cinnamon won't overpower other spices in the batter if you go a little overboard.

A gingerbread house is incomplete without its frosting, as it is the structural component that enables you to call it a house in the first place. It's another element of the cake where you're given a ton of flexibility, as the airiness is completely up to you. The pomegranate seeds, a more earthy topping than M&M's or gumdrops, add a perfect visual and flavor contrast to round out your dessert.

Here's how you can transform the classic gingerbread house into an elegant, sophisticated baked good:

It's never a holiday feast without cranking on your oven, which you should preheat to 350 degrees Fahrenheit. Prep time only takes 5 minutes (not counting your mise en place), so by the time your batter is formed, placed and set in the cake pan of your choice, the oven should be fully heated. Your cake pan should be buttered or greased and dusted with flour before making the batter.

To make the batter, you'll first want to whisk your dry ingredients together. In a medium-sized bowl, add 2 cups of all-purpose flour, 1 tea-

spoon of baking soda and ¼ teaspoon of salt along with 1½ teaspoons of cinnamon, 1 teaspoon of ginger and a pinch of cloves, each of them ground. For the spices and herbs, there's no need to buy these in their preground form — buying them as prepacked pantry items will work fine.

For the wet ingredients, you'll want to grab a similarly sized bowl, add ½ cup of light brown sugar and your softened stick of butter, and mix them together using an electric hand mixer (or a stand mixer, if you have one) on medium speed for about 3 minutes or until it is light and fluffy.

While it's mixing, add 2 eggs to the bowl, one at a time, thoroughly beating each egg once adding. Then, add the zest of 1 lemon and ½ cup of molasses, followed by your initial dry ingredients, which you'll add in two separate batches, one half at a time. Mix the newly added ingredients until slightly incorporated to avoid over-mixing, and don't forget to scrape down the sides of your bowl during the process.

Add the mixture to your cake pan, smoothing the top with a frosting spatula. By now, the oven should be preheated. Place the pan in the oven and set a timer for 35 minutes, in order to check the doneness of the cake.

In the meantime, you can prepare the frosting which consists of freshly whipped cream. All you need is 1 pint of whipping cream and the mixer of your choice. Put the cream in your mixer and whip away at high speed until soft peaks form, making sure not to over-mix your frosting, which takes about 1-2 minutes. Set aside at room temperature or in the fridge if you're storing it for later.

Once the 35 minutes have passed, it's time to see if the cake is cooked. It's important not to overbake or it'll end up as dry as stale gingerbread cookies. The best way to check for doneness is to perform the toothpick test: insert a toothpick into the center of the cake, and if it comes out clean — looking the same way it did before inserting — the cake is ready. If there is a little residue on the toothpick, let it cook for another 5 minutes before checking again.

Once it's ready, set the cake pan on a wire rack to cool for at least 10 minutes before removing to avoid having the cake fall apart. Then you're all set to place the cake on the serving platter of your choice and get ready to garnish.

Generously coat the cake with frosting, allowing plenty of space for the pomegranate seeds to stick to. An easy way to deseed a pomegranate is by using a paring knife to carefully remove its stemmed end, then after slicing it into 1/5ths and using a wooden spatula or a large knife, tap the face-down pomegranate until all the seeds are released into a bowl. Sprinkle the pomegranate seeds onto the frosting and dust with some optional confectioner's sugar.

Your cake is now ready to serve, with the ultimate blend of flavors and colors to round out a perfectly executed holiday meal.

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