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Photo By Mitch Mandel When hickory trees populated America, people would rush to gather the sweet, butternuts in the fall before the animals did. Carol Meeks of Indianapolis, said in 1838 her great-grandparents bought Indiana farmland with a plethora of shagbark hickory trees. The gathering of the nuts became a generations-old tradition, and the nuts were laid under beds in the old farmhouse to dry, before cracking, sheltering and folding the nut meat into cakes and biscuits for the holidays. Smooth, ivory-colored hickory nuts are among the few native American nuts, and Native Americans ate them raw. They are much like the pecans, just smaller, harder to obtain, and more labor-intensive to track. Hickory wood is known for its strength and durability, used for tool handles and fence posts in addition to firewood. This pound cake with chopped hickory nuts folded into the batter was popular during the 1800s and was adapted from The First Ladies Cookbook by Margaret Brown Klapthor. It was a favorite recipe from Sarah Polk, wife of former U.S. President James K. Polk. — Anne Byrn Butter and flour for representation of the pan 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature 2 cups granulated sugar 4 large eggs, separated 3 cups all-purpose flour 2 teaspoons baking powder 1/2 teaspoon salt 1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice 1 cup whole milk or half-and-half 1 cup cho pecans or pecans 1/2 teaspoon pure almond extract (optional) 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract (optional) Place a rack in the middle of the oven, and preheat the oven to 350°F. Gently butter and flour a 10-inch mood span, and shake out the excess flour. Set aside the pan. Place the butter in a large mixing bowl and beat with an electric mixer on medium speed until creamy, 1 minute. Add the sugar, a few tablespoons at a time, beat on medium to light and creamy, 2 minutes. Add the egg yolks, one at a time, beat until combined. Set aside. Place the flour, baking powder and salt in a large mixing bowl and sift to combine. Set aside. Place the egg white in a large mixing bowl and, with clean knockers, beat at high speed until tight peaks form, about 4 minutes. Set aside. Stir the lemon juice into the milk. Alternately add the flour mixture and milk to the butter mixture in 3 additions, beating at low speeds just to combine. Beat in the hickory nuts and extracts, if desired, at low speed until combined. Manually fold the beaten egg whites into the batter, just until combined. Turn the batter into the prepared pan, smooth the top and place the pan in the oven. Bake the cake until it is golden brown and starts to pull away from the sides of the pan, 55 to 60 minutes. Remove the cake from the oven and place the pan on a wire rack to cool for 20 minutes. a knife around the edges of the pan, giving the pan a soft shake, then wrap the cake around the rack to cool, right right for 30 minutes. Cut and serve. Tags: Cake lemon juice Milk/Cream Dessert Reviews (4) FAQ (0) photo credit Nancy Long I first posted this recipe five years ago. Today is my mommy’s birthday and I am putting it again in honor of her – and because this post has climbed to #7 in recipes from this blog since March 2020. Thank you, COVID quarantine! November 16, 2020. Today, my mommy celebrates her 11th birthday in Heaven. We always have Hickory Utility Cake for her birthday. We still do. Now we eat it in honor of her — and in memory. My sisters and I were scattered from Virginia to Maryland to Nebraska to Canada. Every year since she left, we remember Mommy and her love for Hickory Nut Cake. many hickory nut cakes ago There are six of us, and every year, at least four or five of us are able to find a meeting place where we can celebrate the woman she was. Someone brings the Hickory Nut cake with that delicious frost (and it’s not me). Finding ways to celebrate our hickory nut cake tradition One year, my Canadian sister Ida Marie was in the states and a Maryland sister, Rachel, drove to Pennsylvania to see her at her motel. She took two pieces of that cake with them so they could enjoy it together. When the rest of us met a few weeks later, Alice took the rest of the cake out of the freezer and brought it along to share at our gathering. Directions for the hickory nut cake Those flakes in the batter are the chopped nuts It’s a simple cake recipe and freezes well. The diagonal? Now it’s a specialty! For the cake you will need the usual ingredients: shortening, sugar, milk, salt, flour, baking powder, eggs and hickory nuts. Mix the batter and put it in pans to bake. Let the cake cool after coming out of the oven. Ripe instructions Sit ripe between the two layers, and then proceed with the edges (if you prefer) and on top. The oblique is what makes the cake. This recipe is the best there is - if you take the time to do it right. Brown sugar, cream and butter. That’s all. Vanilla is optional. I was lucky to visit a cousin overnight on my way back to western Maryland. She was delighted to help me make the oblique for our moms’ cake! Start by mixing the ingredients for the diagonal in a kettle. Learn about hickory nut frost from a cousin Here’s my cousin Naomi around us starting. When I asked her if we should use heavy or light cream, she replied, It depends whether you have a Guernsey or a Holstein. Naomi grew up on a farm and she knows more about the fat content of milk than I do. We used 1/2 cup light cream and 1/2 cup heavy cream. Once the ingredients are well mixed, cook at medium-high. Do not stir. Cook until a drop in a glass of water turns into a ball instead of staying in a rope. Start... finishing the diagonal the mixture. You can put the pan in cold water. Let it cool until you can hold your hand on the bottom of the pan. For real! This is how the directions are written. Who needs a thermometer?! Put more cold water in your sink and start stirring. Keeping the kettle in the cold water will harden it faster. the color becomes lighter! After 9 minutes of stirring - with Naomi doing most of it. You’ll see that the color is even lighter. A wooden spoon is recommended. If you’ve ever tasted taffy, you’ll know this taste. Once the frost is tight enough, drop it on the cake and spread it. Don’t let it run down the sides. You can ripen the sides if you want, but you don’t want it to be so running that it runs from the side. The finished product This is what a hickory nut looks like. The one on the left is the nut in its thick, outer shell. The one on the right, of course, is the way it looks when you crack it open to get the nut. No wonder our mothers let their children crack those nuts! Photo credit: Willis Beitzel My sisters have replaced another ripe recipe that is faster and easier to do. (It also has a lot more sugar.) Another ripe recipe If you think the Caramel Frost recipe directions are too difficult, you can try this one instead: Hickory Utility Cake Ripe Ingredients: 1/2 cup heavy milk or cream, 1 cup butter, 2 cups brown sugar, 1/2 cup flour, 1 teaspoon. Vanilla Directions: Mix flour and sugar in a saucepan. Add rest of the ingredients. Bring to the boil. Cool slightly, then add about 2 pounds of powdered sugar. Photo Credits: Alice Miller Orendorf and Rachel Miller The Recipe 1/2 cup shortening 11/2 cups sugar 3 eggs 21/2 cups cake flour 1/2 teaspoon salt 2 teaspoons baking powder Milk - 1 cup 1 cup chopped h 3 cups brown sugar 1 cups brown sugar 1 cups whole milk or heavy cream 2 tablespoons butter 1 teaspoon vanilla Cream shortening Gradually add sugar and beat until fluffy Add egg yolks and beat to mixed Sieve flour and add salt and beat to fluffy Add egg yolks and beat to mixed Sieve Flour and add salt and beat until fluffy Add egg yolks and beat to mixed Sieve Flour and add salt and beat until fluffy Add egg yolks and beat to mixed Sieve Flour and add salt and beat until fluffy Add egg yolks and beat to mixed Sifmeal and add salt and beat until fluffy Add egg yolks and beat to mixed Sift flour and add salt and baking powder to flour. Add seasoning to milk, then alternate dry and wet ingredients until they are well mixed. Clothing egg white until stiff, then add the chopped nuts to the egg whites. Pour into a greased bread pan or two layer pans Bake at 350 for 30 minutes for a round cake, or for one hour for bread cake. For the oblique, mix ingredients together in a saucepan. Stir until the sugar is dissolved. Cook - but do not stir - until the syrup has a ball shape. (238 on your thermometer). You can test it by putting a drop of frost in cold water. If it forms a soft ball (and not a thin trickle), then that’s right. Let it cool until you can hold your hand on the bottom of the pan. Beat until creamy (works better if you do it by hand instead of with a blender) and spreads on cake. Cover with whole hickory nuts or chopped nuts. Although not the easiest to source, hickory nuts are a delicious and versatile treat, perfect for adding an extra-special touch to holiday baking projects. Every product we feature is independently selected and reviewed by our editorial team. If you make a purchase using the links included, we can earn commission. I was almost forty years old before I was introduced to the magic of the shagbark hickory nut. My new boyfriend (now husband) and I went to the Kane County farmer’s marketplace in Madison, Wisconsin, just before Halloween, and as he confused the endless tables of apples and gourds and pumpkins and brussels sprouts, he suddenly stopped dead in his tracks and threw up his arms as if someone had made a spectacular touch somewhere. HICKORY NUTS! he exclaimed and started stacking small bags of his arm like a waiter driving an eight-top. I looked closer. The nuts in the bags resemble miniature rounded pecans. I have one of the monster basket. The first flavor was definitely pecan-ish, but it is grounded with a back note of resin, like a large pine nut, the sweetness balanced with the smallest bit of bitter forest floor, like a large Piedmontese red wine. As with any raw nut, the texture was a bit chilly, but not unpleasantly so, and I knotted at my husband as his eyebrows asked me if maybe he should grab another bag. He explained that he grew up on them in Kentucky, that his Dad was a master of the complicated fiddly process of sheltering them, hammering them open and teasing the nut halves with a pen. It’s a particular skill to access hickory nuts in general, but a real gift to get them out in full halves instead of small pieces, hence the snack-sized bags we buy at a not insignificant price tag. A month later they co-stared in my husband’s family recipe for PeHic Pie, a take on a classic pecan pie, but with half pecans and half hickory nuts. I’ve never been a big pecan pie fan, I find they tend to cloak a little bit, but this one was a revelation. The hickory nuts tempered the sweetness and made for a pie that wasn’t the usual one-note experience. I was hooked and started experimenting with them. Turns out that hickory nuts are one of the best nuts I’ve ever cooked with. Roast, all the flavors I tasted in the raw nuts have become elevated, and that makes them super versatile. They can go, of course, where a pecan can go, but with their hit of resin, they can swap out for pine trees in dishes like pesto, and the earthy flavor with that slight lean after bitter makes them a good change from black walnuts. I orned them, put them in biscuits and muffins, and had a buttered hickory nut ice cream that kicked buttered pecans right out of the rotation. worked well in banana bread and oatmeal cookies. I flavoured them with salt and red pepper flakes and thyme and used them on top of salads and autumn soups. I ground them. flour and have a torte-style cake with them that rocked my world. While hickory nuts can often be forged for free, if you have access to a tree or a local forest, be warned. They are a bear to prep for. In between getting the out-of-shell mode, ensuring the indoor nut isn’t shapely or pre-eaten by bells, and then getting them out of the super-hard shell, it’s not a nut for the faint of heart. So much so that they are not commercially available. Most online ordering options are for hand-foraged and picked nuts that aren’t cheap. Dipped up, picked hickory nuts will likely run you anywhere from \$22-36 a pound. Pricy? To be sure. Worth it? I think so. They are a special occasion, special recipe item. They are for holiday baking and birthdays and anniversaries. Hard to source and with a limited season, if you find them, stock up. They beautifully freeze both raw and roasted, so I keep bags from both in the freezer and pull them out when the opportunity warranties. Guarantees.

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