

The French Cake by Katie Riggs

One of my favorite movie scenes is from “Men Don’t Leave”, a movie about which I remember nothing except this one scene. The heroine, played by Jessica Lange, is a stressed out single mother who compulsively bakes muffins and in a fit of temper hurls them out her apartment window. A stressed woman chucking muffins out the window – now here’s a Jessica Lange I can relate to!

Baking has long been my response to stress as well. Truthfully, baking is my response to a whole range of emotions – happiness, despair, worry, boredom, anxiety. While I was working on my dissertation, far more bread issued from my kitchen than did original thoughts from my brain. A friend accused me of actually earning a Ph.D. in yeast.

This year I seem to have discovered what all the baking has been for. I can finally fake it. Without recipes or familiar measuring, mixing, or baking implements I’ve been able to turn out passable, if oddly shaped, breads, cookies, and cakes. We have one measuring device in the apartment – a glass beaker that confounds measurement by volume and by weight in such a way as to seem entirely arbitrary. Sam and I made the fortuitous discovery that his Action Man Extreme Kayak Adventure toy has a kayak paddle that works quite effectively as a rubber spatula. During the fall we ate a lot of banana bread, since at the market I kept forgetting the difference between kilos and pounds and blithely agreeing to buy several kilos of bananas. Not knowing how to politely extract myself from the deal once I saw the amount, I frequently became the proud owner of 18 bananas, all ripe.

We’ve tried out lots of these baked goods on the boys’ friends, who are pretty well split in their response to the sweets offered at our house – some gobble them up with glee (bananas in bread? what an amusing American oddity!), some recoil in horror (*mon Dieu!* is not even bread sacred?!). One of Carson’s friends gave me a serious discourse on the fine points of how a *sable avec pepites du chocolat* differs from the chocolate chip cookie I had just fed him. When 8-year-old boys speak

knowingly about ingredients, texture, and flavor...well, you know you're not in Kansas anymore. I have fantasies about how playground fights break out: you can slight my mother's appearance or abilities, but if you say she bakes with margarine – them's fightin' words.

Preparing food for a French audience is a daunting undertaking regardless, but baking perhaps even more so. If you consider how many boulangeries and patisseries one passes in the course of a day – each one a sensual banquet – then any homemade morsel is bound to at least *look* humble. I received what may be the biggest compliment of my baking career when one morning I came up behind two friends also walking their children to school and heard them discussing with enthusiasm the oatmeal chocolate chip cookies I had given them the day before. (One of these is a woman who thinks nothing of preparing duck for her children's lunch on a basic Tuesday.)

Before we left for France a neighbor who had lived Geneva for a little while told me that I should stock my suitcases full of chocolate cake mixes – “Europeans just love those.” I thought she was nutty. What could Betty Crocker possibly have over any European pastry chef? But only six weeks into our sojourn I was called upon to make “a real American birthday cake” for a party celebrating the 39th birthday of a neighbor. He and his wife had lived in the U.S, so they presumably had something in mind – probably something like a Betty Crocker cake mix. Of course I couldn't refuse the request, but I was intimidated. (I discovered too late that the French also have cake mixes – already mixed even, so one just has to squeeze the batter out of the foil pouch into a pan. Then again, that wouldn't have been “real American,” would it? Betty Crocker makes you crack your own eggs.)

The cake was successful – a plain yellow cake, but moist and vanilla-ey. But then I realized what it is that makes an American birthday cake an American birthday cake. Frosting. Thick, gooey, buttercream frosting. And you can't make a decent buttercream frosting using just a fork. My attempt resulted in a grainy, stiff, overly sweet concoction that hardened onto the sides of the cake. It had a matte finish, when it should have been glossy. So I set about disguising the cake, which was beginning to look like a cylinder of plaster. The swirls

of dark and white chocolate I tried wouldn't adhere to the stiff pattern of knife-strokes in the frosting. I stuck them in the fridge to harden, and then tried to prop them up around the sides of the cake, where they set about sagging into sad little piles. My mother long ago taught me the redemptive power of whipped cream; the kind in a can with a spray nozzle is particularly useful for disguising ugly desserts under fluffy white rosettes. But the French – bless their purist palates – don't add chemical stabilizers to their canned whipped cream, so the stuff almost immediately begins to soften and spread. By the time we had walked the three blocks from our apartment to our friends' apartment, my decorative rosettes had become shapeless blobs. As the evening progressed they wept down the sides of the cake and puddled on the plate.

When we left the party at 10:30, people were just beginning tuck into the feast laid out on the table. The cake huddled at the back of the spread looking appalling. The longer it sat there, the less attractive it became. I was relieved to escape from the party before anyone tried the cake. We found out later that the party went on much of the night and lots of wine was consumed. The host told us,

“Yeah, we probably didn't get around to eating the cake until 3 in the morning.”

(Phew, I thought, everyone was probably too drunk to notice.)

“But we took pictures of it.”

We haven't been invited back.