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# How to cook the perfect lemon drizzle cake

Is this citrus sponge a big wet sticky kiss of a teatime treat, or a damp squib?



Felicity's perfect lemon drizzle cake. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

Drizzle is not normally good news. Not when it's falling from the sky, not when it's replacing a decent helping of sauce, and especially not when it's found on a menu in close proximity to the words "balsamic vinegar". Deliciously sticky, sweet and sour lemon drizzle cake is the one, and very honourable, exception.

A deluge of the all-important citrusy syrup would be over generous here, yielding a

soggy sponge only fit for lining the trifle bowl. No, when it comes to cake, drizzle is, for once in its life, absolutely perfect. But just as there's more than one way to skin a cat should you have need to, there's also a multitude of options out there when it comes to the more useful skill of drizzling cakes, all claiming to offer the best, the stickiest, the most indulgent take on this teatime classic.

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## Cake

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Gary Rhodes recipe lemon drizzle cake. Photograph:

Felicity Cloake

Before drizzle, of course, comes cake. [Geraldene Holt's Cakes](#), Gary Rhodes and Tonia George all plump for a solid, workaday victoria sponge: equal amounts of butter, sugar and self-raising flour, whisked with egg, to produce a result Holt assures me is "recommended for a fundraising stall". Rich and fluffy, the classic victoria is certainly one to bear in mind for my do-gooding new year's resolutions. (Rhodes claims it's a "classic example of an enriched bread which is now served as a tea bread", but as the ingredients and method are exactly the same as for a victoria sponge, the only thing bread-like about his is the loaf tin it's baked in. He does add milk to make a sloppier mixture, however, which seems to give a lighter, fluffier result.)

Nigel Slater replaces some of the flour with ground almonds, which I like: the sweetness of the nuts works well with the sharpness of the lemon, and the cake itself has a more interesting texture. [Raymond Blanc's Gallic take](#), meanwhile, ups the egg content and sticks in some double cream for good measure. Although in ordinary circumstances I wouldn't kick it off the tea table, it seems dense and bland in comparison with the others.

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## Syrup

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Raymond Blanc recipe lemon drizzle cake. Photograph:

Felicity Cloake

The idea of drizzle also appears to have been lost in translation, because Blanc brushes his cake with apricot jam, followed by a lemon glaze made from icing sugar, lemon juice and zest. The jam effectively acts as a seal, so there's no hope of any icing seeping into the sponge itself. With a heavy heart, I have no choice but to disqualify it from the competition.

Slater, who modestly doesn't even claim his cake as a drizzle number, simply squeezes over some lemon juice, but this makes the sponge itself too sharp for my taste. Rhodes mixes the juice with golden syrup, which reminds me pleasantly of a steamed pudding, and Holt and Tonia George both go for granulated sugar instead which, as the latter promises, delivers a particularly robust sugary crust – indeed it's almost crunchy. I really like this bonus texture: it's a pleasant contrast to the sticky, fluffy cake beneath. Holt also adds an audacious slug of rum, which, she says in the introduction, is inspired by a French recipe from the 1930s. I'm sad to say, however, that I can't detect it in the cake itself.



Geraldene Holt recipe lemon drizzle cake. Photograph:

Felicity Cloake

Poking holes into the cake to help the syrup sink in, as recommended by most recipes, does seem to give a good, even distribution – although more important is adding the syrup while the cake is still warm. Bear in mind it will always seem like more liquid than the cake could possibly absorb, but don't worry, it will always come up trumps. (Saying that, George's whopping four-lemon version really was too much for my taste: the cake was so wet it fell apart under the knife, although other testers vigorously denied this was a problem.)

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## Icings and fillings

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Tonia George recipe lemon drizzle cake. Photograph:

Felicity Cloake

To be honest, George's magnificent cake provides a lot of food for thought: it's the only one which includes a filling. In fact, it includes two fillings: a homemade lemon curd topped with a layer of mascarpone mixed with sugar. "If time is tight you can make it without the filling and you'll never know what you're missing," she says. "Make it with, and I'm afraid you'll be hooked for life." It's certainly good; the sharp richness of the curd is thrown into relief by the sweet creaminess of the cheese, but for me it's too much: a lemon drizzle should be a simple thing, rather than a rococco masterpiece of coloured swirls. My testers, as mentioned, are unbothered by my objections.

Like Blanc, Slater tops his cake with a mixture of lemon juice and icing sugar, which wraps the cake in an attractive translucent cape, pooling in cracks and dripping temptingly down the sides. Rhodes and Holt wisely avoid any icing, relying on the power of the drizzle: and I'm inclined to agree – with the crunchy, granulated sugar syrups used by Holt and George, anything further would seem to be over-egging the cake.

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## Flavourings

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Nigel Slater recipe lemon drizzle cake. Photograph:

Felicity Cloake

Rhodes, Slater, Blanc and George all include finely grated lemon zest in their cakes. Adding it right at the start, before you cream the butter and sugar together, as George suggests, is a brilliant idea – it "helps to release the oils in the zest, producing a much more lemony sponge". Holt, as it's her standard victoria sponge recipe, uses vanilla extract instead, which, as ever, I'm going to leave out – the lemon should speak for itself. Blanc also adds a drop of dark rum to his sponge: it must be a French thing. Again, I can't taste it, much to my regret.

The lesson here seems to be, keep it simple. Lemon is all you need – but you can have too much of a good thing. Adding lemon juice to the mix, like Rhodes, makes the whole thing too sour for my liking: tart drizzle demands sweet cake. And both demand a nice cup of tea.

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## Perfect lemon drizzle cake

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Felicity's perfect

lemon drizzle cake. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

**175g butter, softened**

**175g caster sugar**

**2 unwaxed lemons**

**3 eggs**

**100g self-raising flour**

**75g ground almonds**

**A little milk**

**100g demerara sugar**

1. Pre-heat the oven to 180C/160C fan. Grease and line a 1lb loaf tin with greaseproof paper. Beat together the butter, caster sugar and the finely grated zest of 1 lemon until light and fluffy. Add a pinch of salt and the eggs, one at a time, beating until well combined before adding the next.

2. Sift over the flour and fold in, followed by the almonds. Add just enough milk to bring the mixture to a dropping consistency (so that it falls off the spoon), then spoon into the prepared tin and even out the top. Bake for about 50-55 minutes, until a skewer comes out dry (crumbs clinging to it are fine).

3. Briefly mix together the remaining lemon zest, and the juice of both the lemons with the demerara sugar, then poke holes all over the top of the warm cake and pour over the drizzle, waiting for the cake to absorb one lot before adding the next.

4. Allow to cool in the tin before turning out.

Lemon drizzle cake: a big wet sticky kiss of a teatime treat, or a damp squib? And is lemon even the best choice: why do we never hear about orange, or grapefruit drizzle cakes – can anyone remedy the situation?

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