

Miss Pavlova and the Dobos torte
The History of Cake
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FOREWORD

It would be hard to imagine a life without cakes, wouldn't it? Cakes are not just a part of celebrations — Christmas and birthdays — but also a part of our everyday lives. Everyone loves baking cupcakes or going to a cake shop to eat something delicious. While we have been eating much of the food we eat today since ancient times (see: *The Earl of Sandwich and the Neapolitan Pizza*), cake as we think of it now only came into being a few hundred years ago.

Of course, they baked cakes in ancient Egypt, too, but they were more like flatbreads flavoured with honey and dried fruit. Do you know why? It was simply because people did not know anything about sugar, and later, once they did, for a long time only the very rich could afford it. Also, wood-fired ovens were not cheap, so not everyone could actually afford to bake a lot. Not many people knew how to bake, and there were no recipe books! Nowadays, anyone can bake a loaf of bread at home, but there was a time when it was a rare and highly valued skill, almost an art form.

It took a long time for sugar, flour, eggs and butter, which are the basis of most cakes and pastries, to finally be put together to create the delicacies that sweeten our lives. Although you would be well advised not to consume too much sugar because that would be unhealthy and can damage your teeth, cakes still remain an important part of our food culture and tell us a lot about our history. For hundreds of years, sugar, butter and chocolate have accompanied people on the long journey that ended with the opening of the first confectioners.

In this book you can read many interesting stories about things such as who baked the first birthday cake, why croissants are crescent-shaped, what the French Revolution had to do with macaroons, why the Pharaohs' tombs were filled with cakes, and why nuts and ginger are found in Christmas cakes.

HONEY AND THE BEES

Sugar was a relatively late addition to our cookery, but sweet cakes were made long before it came on the scene. People quickly discovered the delicious and nutritious taste of sweetness — it is no mere coincidence that breast milk is also sweet — and have always sought opportunities for sweetness. For a long time, however, this was no easy task.

In Europe, bees came to the rescue. Even in prehistoric times people ate honey — we know this from the drawings they made on the walls of the caves where they lived. They did their best to get hold of the delicious, sweet honey, and they also discovered that not all bees made honey — but those that did were best kept near the cave so that they did not have to search for it hidden out in the countryside. So it was that they built them hives or bee houses. This is how the domestication of the honeybee began — while it may sound strange, the honeybee is actually a domesticated animal, a kind of pet!

An enormous number of bees live together in a hive, and they are very good at dividing up all the necessary work. The worker bees forage for flowers and then, using their long proboscises, collect the nectar and dew that accumulates from the flowers.

The nectar they have sucked up is then carried to the hive, where their worker colleagues have already carefully prepared the small hexagonal wax cells into which they put the syrupy nectar for storage. Their aim, obviously, is not to please human beings; they are collecting the nectar for their mates and themselves for the long winter ahead, so that they have something to eat when the plants are not in flower, but they produce far more than they actually need.

The nectar is very dilute at first, so some bees are simply left to flap their wings up and down in the hive. This thickens the nectar by helping to evaporate away the water. In the meantime, the bees sort and concentrate the honey and, when a honeycomb cell is full, seal it up with a wax cap. The wax is also made by the bees, using glands they have in their abdomen.

The beekeeper, wearing a protective suit, then takes the honeycomb out of the hive, removes the wax caps and squeezes out the golden honey. Of course, they cannot take all of the honey from the bees, because then the bees would have nothing to eat until the next spring. We can also use the wax left over from the honeycomb to make candles, which are one of the most ancient forms of lighting used by humans.

Honey can be made from many different kinds of flowers, the best known in Hungary, for example, is acacia honey, which is not only good for sweetening, but is also very healthy. If you ever get the chance, do go to a honey tasting and try all the different types of honey! Linden tree honey, sunflower honey and chestnut honey are all delicious.

Did you know that there were no honeybees in America until they were introduced by settlers following the discovery of America by the Europeans? Prior to that, the native Americans had extracted syrup from the sap of the maple tree and used the leaves of the agave cactus to sweeten their food instead of honey. The bark of the maple tree is tapped in the spring after the big winter frosts to make a deliciously sweet syrup, which is still regularly consumed in the Americas today.

To produce a jar of honey, a bee needs to make about 50,000 trips between the hive and the flowers. It must fly as far as going to the moon! The next time you eat honey, think of all the work involved! Of course, it was thousands of years from the domestication of bees to the first gingerbread, but it was the first step towards the delicious pastries we know today.

As the bees fly from flower to flower, they also carry pollen from one plant to another, pollinating the plants. This allows the flower to later develop into fruit. If the bees did not pollinate the apple tree, it would not grow apples even if it flowered well. So, bees not only make honey for us, but also delicious fruit! That is why it is so important to look after them.

Baklava — the most honeyed dessert

Baklava is a Middle Eastern pastry made in many countries (the Middle East is the south-western part of Asia, closer to Europe), based on a pastry made from a dough filled with nuts or pistachios and sweetened with lots of honey. It is often said that baklava was first baked in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, Turkey, the centre of the Ottoman or Turkish empire. The palace had a library, hospital, bakery, council chamber, beautiful gardens and stables. Today the huge palace is kept as a museum.

The Turkish Sultan lived there with his family, and legend has it that the Sultan baked this delicious, sweet cake for his soldiers, which was mainly eaten at celebrations and large feasts. In wealthy Turkish families, it was considered a great honour to find a cook who could stretch the baklava dough very thin. If you have never tasted baklava, you should definitely visit a Turkish restaurant one day and try some!

Sweet-toothed pharaohs

One of the strangest things about honey, and of course one of its great advantages, is that it never goes off. It is hard to imagine, but archaeologists have even found honey in the tombs of the Egyptian pharaohs! They tasted it, and despite being thousands of years old, it was still delicious. The ancient Egyptians believed that human life would continue in the afterlife, so they packed delicacies alongside the pharaohs buried in the pyramids so they would not starve in the afterlife. This custom is of great help to modern scientists, as everything in these tombs has been preserved undisturbed. As a result, we now know exactly what the Egyptians ate three or four thousand years ago. This is how we know that the Egyptians were great masters of cakes and sweet tarts.

The world's oldest honey was found in the tomb of the Pharaoh Tutankhamun, and it is more than 3,000 years old. The tomb of Tutankhamun — who died at the very young age of nineteen — was a real sensation because it is the only pharaoh's tomb that had survived to the modern age completely intact without falling victim to grave robbers. Archaeologists also found hundreds of baskets filled with food in the tomb. Not only honey, but also bread, fig cakes and even meat: nine ducks, four geese, pigeons, chickens and beef were packed for the pharaoh's journey to the afterlife.

The Egyptians also used honey to make cakes. Besides sweetening, honey was also used in medicine to treat eye and skin diseases. But honey was admired not only by the Egyptians but also by the Greeks. They believed that honey came down from the sky on the back of a rainbow.

The World's Most Famous Cakes

Artemis and the birthday cake

The ancient Greeks were fond of honey and sweets. They were also the first to bake cakes, at least in the round shape we are familiar with. The round cake was made in honour of Artemis, the goddess of the moon. Its shape is a reference to the moon and a symbol of perfection. The ancient Greeks considered the circle to be the perfect shape. The circle is also easy to divide into equal parts and cut into pieces, thus expressing unity.

Sometimes a candle was also placed on the cake, a reference to the light of the moon. The candle cake was not eaten, however, but offered to the gods, who were thought to be similar to humans and would thus enjoy eating delicious food. In ancient times people believed that the smoke from the candle would take the prayer up to the gods — which is why you have to make a wish before you blow out the candle!

Of course, you would probably be very surprised if you were to see such an ancient cake today. It looked completely different from today's cakes, and you would find the taste strange, too. The cake bases were made from various grains, raisins, and nuts, with a honeyed goat's curd layer in between, flavoured with aniseed, a strongly flavoured and scented Asian spice. You may be familiar with it from cough sweets. This type of cake was in fact the predecessor of today's cheesecake, but in a different form.

You can see then, that although cake has been around for a long time, at first it had nothing to do with birthdays. It was only in the Middle Ages that the tradition spread, and the candle tradition was revived. Later, it became fashionable to put as many candles on the cake as years of the birthday celebrant's life, enough to light the year ahead.

In German-speaking countries, the first celebration of children's birthdays was called *Kinderfest*. This was the first time that bakeries had offered birthday cakes and started to decorate them with all kinds of colourful and sweet icing — only in wealthy families, of course.

Today, children's birthdays are celebrated all over the world, and birthday cakes are many and varied. In China, for example, they make peach dumplings for children and shape them into peach shapes because peaches are a symbol of immortality. In Indonesia, a rice cake is often made with a double layer of rice and decorated with vegetables. In most African countries, no cake is baked, but in Ghana, for example, it is customary to fry bananas on the morning of a birthday, spiced with ginger.

Black Forest Gateau

This cake is famous all over the world, you have probably heard of it or maybe even tasted it. It is recognised for having lots of cherries or sour cherries in the cream layer, with whipped cream and chocolate chips sprinkled over the top. This cake was first baked in Germany, home of the Black Forest, and also the source of the mighty River Danube that crosses half of Europe to the Black Sea and somewhere in the middle divides Hungary neatly in two. True, the name of the cake refers not to the forest, but rather to the black, red and white folk costume worn there. It is the most popular cake in Germany.

Dobos torte

Hungary's most famous cake, the *Dobos torte* or Dobos cake, was first made in 1884. Many people think it got its name from its distinctive drum-like appearance, but it is actually named after its creator, the master

confectioner József Dobos, who is said to have invented the cake by accident when whilst in a hurry he once poured powdered sugar into the butter instead of salt.

So was born the novelty of butter cream, a great invention because in the fridge-free conditions of the day it lasted much longer than the cream made with milk that had been put in cakes until then. Compared to the fancy, double-decker cakes of the time, Dobos' cake was quite simple and understated. It became one of Queen Elizabeth's — or Sissi, as she was affectionately known to the Hungarians — favourite cakes, and rapidly came into fashion in the big cities of Europe, the famous *Dobos torte* being transported from Budapest in wagons packed with ice.

The Dobos torte is still made according to strict rules, based exclusively on the recipe of József Dobos: it always consists of six sponge cake bases, five layers of chocolate cream between them and caramelized sugar on top. This is both beautiful and delicious, but it was also important for the preservation of the cake, as it seals the top of the cake and prevents it from drying out. The Dobos cake is now world famous and has become quite fashionable. The influence of this Hungarian cake has made cakes simpler and therefore cheaper, making them more accessible to more people.

Cheesecake

As mentioned earlier, cheesecake was made by the ancient Greeks, although cream-cheese cake would be closer to the truth. However, this one really came to fame in America because the most famous version in the world is undoubtedly the New York cheesecake. That is where cream cheese was invented and it can be used to make a much softer cheesecake than traditional cottage cheese. Today, cheesecake is known and loved all over the world, and is made in almost every country.

Carrot cake

Carrots have been used to bake cakes since the Middle Ages, mainly because carrots have always been a cheap ingredient, available everywhere in Europe, and they are sweet. In the twentieth century, this was rediscovered along with the fact that carrot cake was not only delicious but also healthy. Of course, that is only true if you do not stuff it full of sugar!

Sacher torte

Sacher torte is one of the most famous cakes in the world, even though it looks simple at first glance. Two layers of chocolate sponge, with a layer of apricot jam and a covering of chocolate on the top and sides. There is an interesting story behind it too: once, when the confectioner to an Austrian prince fell ill, he asked his apprentice to bake something that would be sure to please the dinner guests. The apprentice's name was Franz Sacher, and he summoned all his courage to invent this chocolate cake in 1832. He was lucky, because the prince loved it, and suddenly everyone started ordering it from him.

Sacher was only sixteen at the time and he spent his whole life perfecting the recipe, and his son also. The cake even started a cake war, with several different bakeries claiming to have the original recipe. The battle was won by the Hotel Sacher Café in Vienna, where the cake is still baked according to the ancient recipe and more than half a million Sacher cakes are sold every year. Two million eggs, eighty tonnes of sugar and seventy tonnes of chocolate are used in the process. If you are ever in Vienna, you really should try it yourself! You can also add a little whipped cream on the Sacher cake, otherwise it can be a little dry!

Eszterházy-torte

The Eszterházy-torte is thought of as one of the most famous Hungarian cakes, and it could easily become a favourite of yours if you like nuts. And Eszterházy-torte contains plenty of nuts, not only in the cream filling, but also in the cake. The most distinctive feature of the Eszterházy is the white fondant (or icing) on top and the dark coloured mesh shapes drawn on it. That is how you are sure to recognise this cake. It is also certain that this cake was first made for a member of the Esterházy family, but exactly who that might have been, we do not know. The Esterházys are the best known of the old Hungarian noble families. Many of their beautiful palaces have survived, such as the palace at Fertőd.

Pavlova

Pavlova cake is Australia's most renowned dessert and arrives on the table every Christmas. A very special cake, it looks like nothing more complicated than meringue with sweetened cream and fresh fruit. The cake is named after the Russian ballet dancer Anna Pavlova, who was a huge star a hundred years ago and whose dancing skills were admired the world over.

Her most famous role was in Swan Lake, the most performed ballet in the world. With this show, Anna Pavlova travelled the world, including to Australia, where she was adored and consequently this cake was created in honour of her visit. According to its first maker, Pavlova's cake is as light as the eponymous ballerina, and the white cake resembles the tutu, the white tulle skirt worn by ballet dancers.

SPECIAL CAKES

Bibingka – The Philippine islands

This fried rice cake is made with rice flour, coconut milk, sugar and butter. In many places where ovens were not available, the cakes were baked in clay pots over a fire. The pot is covered with banana leaves during baking, which gives the cake a very delicate taste. It is mainly eaten as a breakfast dish.

Rogel – Argentina

This beautiful cake is a favourite in the Argentines. Traditionally, it consists of eight layers of caramel cream, with lots of meringue on top. Clearly, it is going to be a very sweet cake.

Mazurek – Poland

Mazurek is a flat, honey cake or tart, which the Poles generally make for Easter. The cake is basically a beautiful table decoration that uses dried fruit, seed, sweets and chocolate cream.

Victoria sponge cake – Britain

This famous cake was invented by the chefs of Queen Victoria of England. The queen loved afternoon tea, so her confectioners tried to create a cake that would complement her hot tea. The soft sponge cake is made with strawberry jam and whipped cream. Afternoon 'tea' is still an important tradition in England today, with scones, biscuits and small sandwiches served alongside the tea as a light meal.

Red Velvet – United States of America

Baked in America for Valentine's Day as a symbol of love, red velvet cake has a deep red colour. This cake was originally made with cocoa powder, but when cocoa became unavailable during the Second World War, bakers began to colour the pastry with beetroot to make it more attractive to guests. The cake stayed red, so even today there is no need to use colouring to achieve this beautiful colour, as the beetroot juice colours the sponge perfectly (but does not make the cake taste like beetroot!).

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