

Globe Life

Veggie delight

Have your rutabaga cake and eat it too

A new cookbook subs parsnips and other veggies for butter and sugar in sweet treats – to surprisingly delicious results

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When British celebrity chef Harry Eastwood bakes, she talks to her ingredients. “Some of [the cakes] are very generous, they roll over and let you do what you want,” the 29-year-old Londoner says, “but sometimes it's a real battle.” For her new cookbook, *Red Velvet and Chocolate Heartache*, Ms. Eastwood – who trained at Le Cordon Bleu – turned her back on traditional French cooking and instead of loading desserts with butter, opted for vegetables.

“In a way it's about listening to the cake itself,” she says. The cakes began to nudge Ms. Eastwood into the vegetable patch when she was starring in the BBC program *Cook Yourself Thin*. A producer asked the chef to make desserts with low-fat ingredients, but Ms. Eastwood refused. “I had to find a way of creating cake that was low fat but still tasted full fat, like the amazing cakes we eat when we are not thinking about losing weight.” She daydreamed about “gorgeous carrot cake,” and decided to experiment with other vegetables.

Three years and many parsnips, squashes and eggplants later, Ms. Eastwood compiled a book with recipes for 80 vegetable-rich cakes. There's a dark-chocolate eggplant cake (the “heartache” in the title), a banana and toffee sticky cake with more butternut squash than banana, a rutabaga-laden lemon and lavender drizzle cake, parsnip vanilla fudge, and strawberries and cream – and zucchini – cupcakes. “In my quest to make healthier cake recipes,” Ms. Eastwood says, “I've stumbled on something that I'm certain improves the cakes.”

I was skeptical. Any time I've baked with “healthy” ingredients, I've ended up with rock-like, sawdust confections. So I tested a few of Ms. Eastwood's recipes. When I set out to bake, the ingredients in my larder looked ready for a colourful vegetable stew. The recipes called not for oil, butter or milk, but vegetables, ground almonds and white rice flour (I opted for brown rice flour, which is even healthier, though both have higher protein and fibre content than standard flour).

In just over an hour, I made one layered birthday cake (of zucchini), 10 orange squash cupcakes and 10 “chocolate chocolate cupcakes” (with hidden carrots). The recipes were easy to execute and the results were as scrumptious as Ms. Eastwood promised. The birthday cake, which filled the kitchen with the smell of lemons, was light and moist with a perfect crumb. The chocolate cupcakes were rich like fudge, their carrots undetectable except for a caramel sweetness. And the orange cupcakes were summery and dense with citrus and almonds. All of the cakes maintained their moisture for days; unlike butter, which solidifies, veggies stay soft.

But could they be as good for you as they tasted? David Jenkins, Canada Research Chair in nutrition and metabolism and a professor at the University of Toronto, thinks so. “This is a good way of getting some of the foods you shouldn't be having but having them in a form which is not that bad,” he says.

There's a “vegetable deficit,” Dr. Jenkins says – people don't experiment enough with vegetables and are unaware of the variety available – so he supports recipes that get cooks into the vegetable garden.

The cakes were satisfying, and Dr. Jenkins says that is because the nuts and vegetables in them slowly release energy. Plus, vegetables are full of fibre, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants, and dilute the calories in traditional recipes but maintain the volume.

“We all love our sweets,” Toronto dietician Vanessa Hurley says, “so if we are going to have our cake and eat it too, then making healthy substitutions or adding vegetables or fruit is a healthy effort.”

But Ms. Hurley adds a caveat: “These are still considered desserts, and of course should be eaten in moderation.”

With these words in mind, and a hope that the delicious cakes were as easy on the waistline as plain frozen yogurt, I compared the calories and saturated fat counts of store-bought sweets to Ms. Eastwood's veggie variety. I was somewhat disappointed that, for example, each orange squash cupcake has 266 calories and 16.1 grams of saturated fat, compared with 350 calories and 5.4 grams of saturated fat in a similar coffee-shop item. A slice of store-bought layer cake can have as many as 700 calories and about 17 grams of saturated fat, while Ms. Eastwood's birthday cake has 419 calories and still 15.2 grams of saturated fat. A serving of grocery-store ginger and lemon cake has 400 calories and 8 grams of saturated fat; Ms. Eastwood's stem-ginger syrup cake has 219 calories and six grams of saturated fat.

Ms. Eastwood's treats are made with wholesome ingredients, and usually have a lower calorie count, but the fat count is comparable, perhaps because of the nuts and icing. As Ms. Hurley says, “No matter how you slice it, common desserts are not part of Canada's Food Guide.” Not even cakes that sprout from vegetables.

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Banana and toffee sticky cake

Ingredients

For the cake

- 3 medium free-range eggs
- 160 g light Muscovado sugar
- 250 g peeled and finely grated butternut squash
- 1 tbsp vanilla extract
- 50 g white rice flour
- 100 g ground almonds
- 2 tsp baking powder
- 1/4 tsp salt
- 80 g Brazil nuts, roughly chopped (or use pecans or macadamia)
- 150 g banana, peeled and finely sliced

For the syrup

- 50g unsalted butter
- 100g golden syrup
- 3 tbsp boiling water

Method

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line the base of a 22 cm-square by 5-cm deep brownie tin with parchment paper. Grease parchment and sides of tin with butter.

In a large mixing bowl, whisk the eggs and sugar until pale and cappuccino coloured (roughly five minutes on full blast). Beat in the grated butternut squash and vanilla extract with a whisk until well combined.

Whisk in the flour, ground almonds, baking powder and salt until smooth. Finally, with the help of a spatula, mix in the Brazil nuts and banana (reserve a small handful of banana slices for the top).

Tip the mixture into the prepared tin. Dot the reserved banana slices over the top of the cake (flat, so that they look like circles) before placing the cake in the oven for 35 minutes.

Once cooked, remove the cake from the oven and let it stand in its tin to cool while you make the toffee syrup.

In a medium-sized saucepan melt the butter and the golden syrup with the water on a low heat until the butter has become liquid. Turn up the heat and, once boiling point has been reached (when the surface is covered in smallish bubbles), continue to boil hard for three minutes exactly.

Once the three minutes are up, take the pan off the heat immediately and beat the bubbles out of the mixture, which should take no longer than 30 seconds.

Drizzle the hot liquid over the cake quickly, which couldn't be happier for the warm, sticky syrup. I tend to tilt the cake in its tin left, right and back and forth whilst the toffee is still hot and runny to get it spread over the surface. If you go and answer the telephone even for 10 seconds, you will have missed the boat and the toffee will refuse to move, let alone run. If this happens, I'm afraid that the only thing to do is to start the toffee stage again and curse yourself for thinking that you could outwit the stuff.

Once the toffee has drenched the top of the cake, let it stand to sink in for 10 minutes before serving. This is heaven with vanilla or toffee ice cream.

Trust me tips: The cooked cake will come out of the oven looking a bit like an Aero chocolate bar on the surface and will be very springy to the touch. This is very normal and no cause for concern.

Step by step guide to making toffee sauce in three minutes

Taming toffee requires confidence. Dissolve the butter with the other ingredients on a medium heat, then turn the heat up to reach full boil. Start the timer for three minutes. Each stage lasts roughly one minute and you can expect the progression in the pan to go as follows:

1. The first stage of boiling will provide you with an angry mixture, made up of lots of little see-through bubbles that rise quickly to the surface of the liquid. They will huff and puff out their chests and get bigger. They will want to creep up the sides of the pan and escape but won't succeed in a medium-sized pan. My pan is only 9 cm deep and my toffee hasn't bubbled over yet.
2. At the second stage you can expect slightly smaller (medium-sized) bubbles that don't come so far up the pan and are less angry than before. They will gradually accept defeat and retreat down the sides. The colour will start to turn from butter yellow to golden caramel.
3. The final stage is gloss and goop. Although the bubbles have pride, and will therefore still be simmering with rebellious defiance at the bottom of the pan, they are not on the attack any more. The smell in the kitchen will be completely of melted butter.

Excerpted from Red Velvet and Chocolate Heartache by Harry Eastwood.

A history of (almost) guilt-free goodies

Vegetables are often pigeonholed to the savoury side of meals, but it wasn't always the way. Elizabeth

Driver, a Toronto-based food historian who spent more than 10 years researching and compiling *Culinary Landmarks: A Bibliography of Canadian Cookbooks*, says Canadians have wholeheartedly incorporated vegetables in their final courses for at least 200 years.

In the early 19th century, the dessert of choice was carrot pudding made from puréed carrots, potatoes and egg. This variation on English plum pudding was a highlight of the Christmas meal, popular because it was easy to make and root vegetables were plentiful – the basic elements of a farmer's larder.

Cookbooks of recent years have also encouraged exploiting the natural sugars in vegetables, such as the now out-of-print *Vegetable Desserts: Beyond Carrot Cake and Pumpkin Pie* and Jessica Seinfeld's 2007 *Deceptively Delicious*, which included a popular recipe for carrot- and spinach-laden brownies targeted at children. Even the Heart and Stroke Foundation took notice of the virtues of vegetable desserts; it offers a recipe for sweet-potato pie online.

Ms. Driver adds that the approach to vegetable desserts has changed over the years. During the Second World War, people turned to vegetables because there was food scarcity in Canada – foodstuffs were being diverted overseas for the war effort. People started to make jams out of zucchini and carrots, capitalizing on their natural sweetness.

In the 1970s, “there were the macrobiotic diets and everybody was sprouting mung beans and making their own plain yogurt,” Ms. Driver says. Prunes were hidden in desserts for their laxative qualities, and veggies such as carrots were added to cakes to make them (almost) guilt-free.

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