

# Full of fruit



Deb Lee of Middlebury, Ind., has made it her business to make a better-tasting fruitcake and she has, which is evident with each bite of her made-from-scratch fruitcakes.

AURA KURELLA/JOURN

## Deb's oatmeal fruit cookies

2/3 cup butter, softened  
2/3 cup packed dark brown sugar  
2 eggs  
1 1/2 cups old-fashioned rolled oats  
1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1 teaspoon baking soda  
1 1/4 cups dried cranberries  
2/3 cup coarsely-chopped white chocolate

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. In a medium bowl, cream together the butter and brown sugar until light and fluffy, about 5 minutes. Beat in eggs, one at a time until smooth. In a separate bowl, blend oats, flour, salt, and baking soda then stir into butter mixture one cup at a time, mixing well after each addition. Stir in dried cranberries and white chocolate then drop by rounded teaspoon onto cookie sheets. Bake for 10 to 12 minutes or until golden brown. Cool on wire racks or clean newspaper.

**Approximate servings:** 30.

**Nutrition per serving:** Calories 134; Fat 6g; Sodium 120mg; Carbohydrate 18g; Fiber 1 g; Sugars 10g; Protein 2g.

## Festive fruitcake bars

1 cup all-purpose flour  
1/4 teaspoon salt  
1/2 teaspoon baking soda  
1/2 teaspoon Saigon cinnamon  
1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg  
1 teaspoon rum extract  
1/2 cup butter, softened  
3/4 cup sugar  
2 eggs  
1 cup dates, chopped  
1/4 cup candied fruit, chopped  
1/2 cup candied red cherry, quartered  
3/4 cup pecans or walnuts, chopped

**Frosting:** 1 1/2 cups powdered sugar  
2 (or more) tablespoons milk

**Garnish:** Candied cherries (red and green)

**Cake:** Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Coat a 13x9x2-inch pan with cooking spray. In a small bowl, combine flour, salt, soda, cinnamon and nutmeg. In a mixing bowl, Cream butter and sugar until light and fluffy, about 5 minutes. Beat in egg until well blended, about 3 minutes then add rum extract. Slowly stir in flour mixture then add dates, candied fruits and nuts. Spread in prepared pan and bake 30 minutes until golden. Cool in pan. Frosting: In a mixing bowl, combine sugar and milk and stir until smooth. When cake has cooled, frost then decorate, if desired with a garnish of red and green candied cherries. Store in an airtight container.

**Approximate servings:** 23.

**Nutrition per serving:** Calories 164; Fat 6g; Sodium 57mg; Carbohydrate 25g; Fiber 1 g; Sugars 19g; Protein 2g

## Concerned for fruitcake's undeserved reputation, woman made it her business

Fruitcakes. They're often a target of jokes, but they have been around for a long time.

They even predate Christmas, so they must possess something delicious to keep a recipe alive.

Fruitcakes are worth their weight. Ancient Romans prized them for keeping them fed in lean times and although a few of the ingredients have changed along the way, three things have remained unchanged for centuries: exceptional shelf life; the fact that they contain fruit and; their high caloric content.

Today, people either love them or hate them. That bothered Deb Lee of Middlebury, Ind.

"Out of nowhere I woke up one morning wondering why people didn't like fruitcake," she said. "So I flipped through some cookbooks, then packed up the kids and went shopping for supplies."

Lee said the nearby Amish community had fresh and dried fruits readily available, so she tried them instead of candied and found that it created a better fruitcake.

"Everyone just loved it," she said. "So much so my sister suggested I make some for a fair she was attending, to sell."

Her sister quickly sold out and asked for more. The more cakes she made and sold, the more the word spread. Soon, she



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*Vitality Cuisine*

needed to install a commercial kitchen to keep up with demand.

"Over time it grew to where it needed a place of its own," Lee said. "It was hard work, but it was worth it."

Twenty-two years later, Lee sits at a table in her "I-Love-Lucy" appointed deli and bakery Next Door Neighbor, where she now spends her days creating mouth-watering morsels and those much-loved fruitcakes.

A larger-than-life Bible verse, "Love Thy Neighbor," is painted on a wall.

"I know God is behind it all," Lee said. "Don't get me wrong. It's long hours and hard work, but it makes me feel good to make so many people happy. It's a blessing."

Her cakes are different. Aside from fresh and dried fruits, she also doesn't soak

### Stale fruitcake?

Stale fruitcakes can be saved, as long as they are not moldy. If you have stored a fruitcake improperly, steaming a stale fruitcake will bring it back to life. If you don't have time to steam, microwave it covered by a moist paper or cloth towel.

— Laura Kurella

them in liquid or liquor.

"I let the customer decide," she said. "They can soak them if they like."

Lee offers special fruitcakes in two different sizes half-pound or 2-pound, in three flavors: traditional, tropical and chocolate. All are aged and ready to eat or give as gifts.

And that's no joke.

Here are recipes to help get you in the fruitcake mood, including one straight from Lee's kitchen to yours.

You may also visit [www.fruitcakesbydeb.com/index.html](http://www.fruitcakesbydeb.com/index.html) Enjoy!

Questions or comments? Contact Laura at: [Laurakurella@yahoo.com](mailto:Laurakurella@yahoo.com).