

A JOYOUS TASTE OF EUROPE FOR YULEFEST

An exhilarating chill to the air, occasional dusting of snow, the warmth of friends and rich comfort food. Yulefest in the Blue Mountains tugs at Mate Herceg's European heritage.

He shares it with visitors and locals at Kyah Boutique Hotel, Blackheath, where he is general manager and executive chef.

"Yulefest is a joyous time to be up in the Blue Mountains as the region is full of energy and there's always great events taking place," he says.

"I love the European feel of it, plus it's a time for gathering, eating and catching up with friends.

"For me it's the simple things I love during Winter in the Blue Mountains: a roaring fireplace and some good wine are the perfect solace to cold weather. And I love a bit of snow – who doesn't?"

Mate, whose heritage is Croatian with many fond memories of baking with his mother, says a rich traditional fruitcake epitomises Yulefest.

"I love a good fruit cake and I think it's sometimes lost with the younger generation.

"Fruit cakes have a place at any time of year in my opinion, but I think they're particularly enjoyable during Yulefest. The combination of fruits steeped in rum plus spices such as nutmeg, ground ginger and cinnamon make it feel like a hearty, cosy treat."



IMAGE David Hill, Deep Hill Media

BY ELLEN HILL

Create your own slice of Yulefest magic with Mate's rich fruitcake.

INGREDIENTS

Soaked fruit mixture:

- 720 g mixed unsweetened dried fruit, *chopped*
- 160 g dried figs *chopped*
- 160 g dried cherries *chopped*
- 120 g dried unsweetened prunes *chopped*
- 100 dark rum

Fruit cake ingredients:

- 180 g plain flour
- ½ teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon ground ginger
- ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 115 g unsalted butter *softened*
- 160 g light brown sugar
- 5 large eggs *room temperature*
- 1 tablespoon freshly grated lemon zest
- 1 tablespoon freshly grated orange zest
- 120 mL freshly squeezed orange juice
- 1 Granny Smith apple *peeled and coarsely grated*
- 90 g slivered almonds
- 40 g finely diced crystallised ginger
- one batch soaked fruit mixture
- 100 g dark chocolate chips

INSTRUCTIONS

- **Day Before Baking:** Combine the dried fruit in a large mixing bowl. Add the dark rum, cover, and allow the mixture to soak at room temperature for a minimum of 12 hours (ideally 24 hours) prior to preparing the fruit cake batter.
- Prepare the fruitcake: Preheat the oven to 150°C with a rack in the centre position. Set aside two 8 x 4-inch loaf pans. Line and grease the pans prior to adding the batter.
- In a medium mixing bowl, whisk together the all-purpose (plain) flour, baking powder, spices, and salt. Set aside.
- In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, cream the softened butter and light brown sugar together over medium-high speed for 3 minutes or until light and fluffy. Reduce speed to medium and add the eggs one at a time, beating just until each egg is incorporated. The mixture will look slightly broken, that's OK
- Over low speed, slowly add the flour mixture until just absorbed. Remove the bowl from the stand mixer. Add the lemon zest, orange zest, fresh orange juice, grated apple, slivered almonds, diced candied ginger, soaked dried fruit mixture (*along with any liquid if it hasn't already been absorbed*), and chocolate (if using). Stir mixture with a large spatula, scraping the edges and bottom of the bowl several times, until all the ingredients are evenly incorporated. It is a very thick, fruit heavy mixture.
- Transfer and divide the batter evenly among the loaf pans. Use an offset spatula to smooth the batter into an even layer. Set the loaf pans on the centre rack, several inches apart from one another. Bake – rotating the pans halfway – for 75 to 90 minutes or until the batter is set and the tops are golden brown. The edges of the cake may also start to pull away *slightly* from the edges of the pan. Remove from the oven and place on a rack to cool completely before removing from the pans.
- **Storing and ageing:** Once the cake has cooled, carefully remove the cakes from the loaf pans and set upright. Soak two large pieces of cheesecloth in medium sherry or triple sec (*they should be lightly damp, not soaking wet when you wrap the cakes, so you may need to squeeze out any excess liquor). Wrap each cake tightly. Cover loaves with wax paper and foil before transferring to a large zip lock bag. Store in the refrigerator for up to 6 to 8 weeks (it can often last even longer). You can serve this cake right after it has cooled, but the flavours improve greatly with time (I recommend several days or up to a week, at minimum). *Unwrap and re-soak cheesecloth once a week.*
- **Garnishing:** If desired, top the fruitcake with a light apricot glaze and whole pecans before serving. Note: I don't recommend glazing the cake if you wish to continue to wrap and age the fruitcake. To prepare the glaze: Combine apricot preserves and water in a small saucepan. Bring to a light simmer, stirring until glaze is shiny and thin. If it is too thin for glazing, reduce to desired consistency. If it becomes too thick, add a teaspoon of water. Brush the tops of the fruitcakes with apricot glaze and garnish with whole pecans.



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