

The Family Fruitcake

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My mother was a well-spring of quotable quotes. Many of her quotes I later found out came from Shakespeare, but she still had a wealth of sayings, colorful metaphors and occasionally epithets. Long before Trump's Twitter account, she showed little restraint in expressing her views on people. One of her favorites, often but by no means exclusively used on various family members and shirt-tail relatives was, "Oh, he's nuttier than a fruitcake!" (That's not from the Bard to my knowledge.) I certainly could talk about "the family fruitcake" as a living family member - in fact several come immediately to mind. But no, I will discuss the family fruitcake as a baked item laden with nuts and fruits.

Fruitcake has long been the butt of jokes in America. Most famously, Johnnie Carson quipped on his show, "The worst gift is fruitcake. There is only one fruitcake in the entire world, and people keep sending it to each other." From then on during the holiday seasons, he featured a woman known for her fruitcake baking as a foil to his fruitcake insults. Perhaps even worse, another comedian asserted, "Reality is like a fruitcake; pretty enough to look at but with all sorts of nasty things lurking just beneath the surface." Legend has it that the inventor of the fruitcake said, "The trash compactor is full, so just dump that in the pan for now."

Well I disagree! In my family fruitcake formed a hallowed tradition. The family fruitcake tradition goes back almost eighty years, but like so many family holiday traditions in so many families, it is now in danger of dying out. It is getting difficult; this year I visited four stores before finding all the ingredients. For the next few minutes I would like to consider what criteria enable us to label something "a family tradition" and to use our fruitcake as an example.

First, traditions should be long-standing to the point they tie into the larger culture and its history. I stated confidently "going back almost eighty years." I know this because every year when we started the cooking the first batch, my mother told the same story. My parents were going to Victory Lutheran Church in

St. Louis, where my father served as organist. Just as groups do today, in late 1941 the church published a cookbook of favorite recipes of its members. On Sunday December 7, 1941 my parents decided to try the fruitcake recipe in the church cookbook. As they were making it, the radio reported the attack on Pearl Harbor, making that first batch a very memorable experience indeed. Subsequent historical research has demonstrated beyond a doubt that when Franklin Roosevelt declared that day a "day that shall live in infamy," he was referring to the Japanese attack - not to the start of our fruitcake tradition.

The entire family should be involved in a tradition. That came automatically to us. The recipe contains large quantities of nuts. My father's basic view of life was that food was an expensive luxury and simply another cost to be minimized. Since unshelled nuts were several cents a pound cheaper than shelled, you can imagine we saw only unshelled. This meant that beginning shortly after Thanksgiving, the entire family sat around the kitchen in multiple hours-long sessions cracking nuts. The labor was divided - the youngest got the easiest nuts to crack, but they still participated. I frankly doubt my father accomplished his cost-saving goal as we kids popped our freshly shelled nuts into our mouths more often than into the bowl. In any case, this was in the days before smart phones, so the entire family actually talked, joked and laughed as we cracked pound after pound of almonds, pecans, walnuts, hazel nuts and Brazil nuts. I remember these long sessions quite fondly as the kick-off of the holiday season.

Our fruitcake production was prodigious. With five kids, we had plenty of lucky recipients: five teachers, five Sunday school teachers, various other school and church staff; then add the mailman, crossing guard, a few neighbors and of course family. We had grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins and even my mother's great-aunt Maud - a venerable elderly lady who was the last relative still living in the tiny hamlet in Missouri where my mother grew up. We took them to pot-lucks, served them at holiday events and parties. The sheer volume became a point of pride, to the extent that my mother began weighing our output and keeping track of our production. As I recall, it ranged from seventy five to a hundred pounds a year. Each batch was large and when we needed to add one more batch to fill the list of recipients, to use up the remainder of that newly

added batch we added still more names to the list. We were dead certain that once someone had ever had one of our fruitcakes, it would be cruelty itself not to give them one the following year!

Even the most durable of traditions leave room open for some innovation. When our fruitcake production line was running full tilt, there were no pre-made disposable foil pans as there are today. We baked our cakes in standard loaf pans, took them out and wrapped them with aluminum foil for distribution - usually with decorative Christmas wrapping over it. For recipients needing, or least us thinking they needed, a larger cake, we used round cake pans, then did the foil wrapping for delivery.

Each year my family received several round tins of candy or cookies, usually given to my father in his role as a church organist. These tins were lovely - bright red backgrounds already decorated with pictures of poinsettias, holiday wreaths and so on. My mother decided these tins were too nice to waste. The way to reuse them was to bake the cakes directly in the empty tins and give them out that way.

Our first experiment failed. There is a reason round cake pans have a "chimney" in the middle. Without that chimney to allow heat into the middle of the pan, you over-bake the edges while the middle stays undercooked. My mother's creativity kicked in. So, we needed a little chimney in the middle of the cake? No problem! We saved the cores from rolls of toilet paper, cut them to length, wrapped them in foil, greased them and put them in the middle. Problem solved - we could reuse the decorative tins, have a nicely baked cake and spend no extra money. I am unprepared to comment on the reactions of our beneficiaries to find a toilet paper core embedded in their fruitcake.

Almost by the very definition of "tradition," whatever the tradition is must be regularly recurring. When I was growing up, neighborhoods and schools were much more stable than today. I went to all nine years of K-8 at the same grade school. The teaching staff was also remarkably unchanging. My younger siblings had many of the same teachers that I did. I can only imagine that when poor Mrs. Goodman, our first grade teacher, got my fruitcake Christmas present, she thanked me graciously. When she got one three years later from my younger

brother, she probably thought, "Oh no, here comes a Lauf with a fruitcake." When my next brother came along at another Christmas, again bearing a fruitcake for the dear lady, she undoubtedly wondered, "How many more Laufs are there yet to come?" Upon finding out we still had two younger sisters, she announced her early retirement. It is unclear whether these events were connected, but she did note the regular recurrence.

Traditions are reinforced when they require some item long in the family. I'm sure many of you will be quite surprised to learn that even the Lauf family has its modest heirlooms lovingly handed down from generation to generation. In our case this is a set of stainless steel flatware. This set first came into the family in the late 1950s. Credit cards were just reaching the general population and as a promotion, my grandfather's card company offered a free place setting of stainless steel flatware whenever the balance was paid on time. The set included a salad fork, fork, knife, teaspoon and tablespoon. My grandfather, being the frugal and prudent German he was, always paid bills on time. He quickly assembled the maximum of eight place settings. This valuable antique passed to my parents and ultimately to me, where Susan and I still use it daily.

This set became important the first time I tried to make the family recipe on my own. I had the recipe in my mother's own handwriting and followed it carefully despite my many years at her side making it. When the batch was done, it tasted rather bland compared to my memory of the fragrant spiciness of my mother's version. I puzzled over what might have gone wrong. Then I realized: I had never even seen a set of proper measuring spoons in the kitchen growing up. A "teaspoon" in our reckoning meant you grabbed one of the teaspoons from the stainless set, took a scoop with it and threw it in the pot. (My mother was not a particularly subtle woman.) That was my mistake: I had used a real, carefully measured "teaspoon." I tested the capacity. The old family way of measuring meant two or three standard teaspoonfuls went in. I corrected my error with the next batch and now consistently use the family heirloom teaspoon to measure spices. The result is just what I remembered.

Any tradition worth its salt should require hermetic knowledge of the most arcane sort, knowledge that can only be passed on by personal participation. I had been a key player in our fruitcake production lines from age six or seven until I left home for the Army. I had made probably hundreds of batches. When I tried my first solo batch when living away from home, it came out leaden. (Yes, some of our recipients might have said, "more leaden.") The next year my mother visited us shortly before the holidays. I told her I was going to make fruitcake and she was to watch and see what I was doing wrong. I did everything right up until one point. I started to stir the mix and she exclaimed, "No! Don't stir here - if you do the cakes will come out like lead!" I didn't stir and things worked just fine. Only inside knowledge passed on from generation to generation can make it just so. Closely guarded like the recipe for Coca Cola or Colonel Sanders' chicken, the original recipe is kept in my large fireproof safe.

I still make fruitcake, maybe not every year, but often enough. We send cakes to my brothers and sisters. Even in this bosom of family not everyone is a fan, but we have made some interesting converts. My Jewish brother-in-law likes it as well as my sister does. My sister-in-law's extended Hispanic family loves it and truly enjoys sharing this Christmas tradition. I should point out that almost every culture world-wide has some version of fruitcake - if you don't believe me, just check recipes on line.

The family fruitcake checks all the boxes of a tradition: long history, whole family involvement, special tools and knowledge, and so on. When my nieces visited us near the holidays, I told them to watch and learn as I made our fruitcake. They were good sports and helped in the kitchen. They also assured me that this tradition would die out with my generation... and they didn't even have to crack nuts. Welcome to modern times!