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21L.707 Essay #5

The Evolution of Carrot Cake

Vegetables have taken on many roles throughout the years, from liquified soup bases, to sad side dishes boiled and doused in butter, to colorful and substantial entrees. One use of vegetables has been subtly present for centuries: their incorporation into desserts. While the fact might make dessert purists balk, dishes like zucchini muffins, carrot cake, and pumpkin pie have been and continue to be extremely popular. Besides being a delicious dessert, carrot cake and its various modes in particular can shed light on the experiences of the society consuming it and the way it perceived nutrition and wealth.

The first documented sweet recipe featuring carrots can be found in *Kitab al-Ṭabīḥ*, a tenth-century Arabic cookbook containing over 600 recipes from Baghdad during its Golden Age. It contains the luxurious dishes of caliphs, lords and dignitaries. The book includes a section about carrots and their nutritional values, stating that it is slow to digest but a diuretic and potent aphrodisiac. All of the recipes including carrots are sweet (sweetened with honey) and several of them explicitly state that their purpose is to “invigorate coitus” (Appendix A). The focus on medicinal properties of food shows the importance of the plant and herb based system of medicine. Particularly, the focus on those effects related to libido is highly indicative of the importance of power and class in medieval Islam’s elite.

When sweet carrot dishes migrated to Europe in the form of carrot pudding, they carried the Middle Eastern flavors with them. In *A Book of Cookrye* gathered by A. W. in 1591, a carrot pudding recipe combines carrots and dates with spices and liver of goose or pig (Appendix B). The sweet and savory mix resembles a Middle Eastern taste palette, as does the use of spices such as cloves and mace. Spices were essential in Middle Eastern cooking, and their availability depended on “uninterrupted trade between the Arabic world and Europe” as Sarah Peterson explains in *Acquired Taste*. The introduction of carrots in sweeter recipes could also indicate the scarcity of sugar, an ingredient which Kate Colquhoun in *Taste* refers to as the “ultimate culinary luxury” during this time. “In the Middle Ages in Europe, when sweeteners were scarce and expensive, carrots were used in sweet cakes and desserts,” describes Alan Davidson in the *Oxford Companion to Food*. Though the recipe calls for some sugar, because of its use of sweet carrots and dates, it would presumably require much less than a regular pudding.

In the following century, another carrot pudding recipe appeared in *A Perfect School of Instructions For the Officers of the Mouth* written by Giles Rose (Appendix C), one of the master cooks to Charles II, in 1682 (very similar ones appearing in other cookbooks of the time, such as *Acetaria: Discourse of Sallets* by John Evelyn in 1699). The recipe is very reflective of the agricultural state of England at the time, with ingredients like “fresh cream,” “new milk,” “fresh butter,” and “new laid eggs” that require a farm and animals at hand. This recipe also displays cooking times and measurements, as cookbooks begin their transition from the hands of elite and trained

chefs in noble households to a more public audience without the extensive training to know how much butter to use in a cake or how long to bake it for.

Carrot puddings further arrived in the public eye in Hannah Glasse's *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* in 1747. The detail in her recipe compared to those before it showcases the transition of cooking and recipe-sharing from being a job for trained chefs to one done by all housewives (Appendix D). In fact, around this time, carrot puddings began popping up in several domestic cookery books, including *The Cooks and Confectioners Dictionary; Or, The Accomplish'd Housewife's Companion...* by John Nott in 1723 and the *Cookbook of Unknown Ladies* containing recipes dating from 1690 to 1830. "Filling, relatively simple to make, inexpensive and idea country fare, puddings crossed the social divides," states Colquhoun. The presence of these recipes is a sign of the reality of class divides and the insistent will for social mobility and keeping up appearances. The "warming, nurturing qualities" of puddings in addition to their high fat and starch content filled diners up before the more expensive meats were served (Colquhoun). The Unknown Ladies Cookbook recipe even specifies of its recipe that "this is the first course" (Appendix E). Of all puddings, carrot pudding in particular was suited to mass appeal because of how much cheaper carrots, a natural sweetener, were than sugar.

The term "carrot cake" itself first began appearing in recipes around 1830 (Appendix F). The rise of "cakes" in general was perhaps in response to the urbanization of the late 18th century, which changed the structure of the working day. Instead of a large dinner at 11am and a small supper later in the day, the modern

three-meal format emerged, begging a midday tea break. Portable cakes and snacks to accompany this tea break and hold workers over through the rest of the day subsequently became quite popular. Cakes, drier than puddings, could also be more suited to eat with tea.

As it was before, the natural sweetness of carrots proved vital to their surge in popularity again during World War II. During the six years of the war, the UK Ministry of Food exerted a significant effort to create enthusiasm for the carrot, one of the few foods that experienced an oversupply rather than a shortage (World Carrot Museum). Propaganda was even released claiming that Royal Air Force's night-flying skills were due to their high consumption of vitamin-A-rich carrots, and carrot consumption spiked. The Kitchen Front, a wartime BBC radio program with millions of listeners, gave people advice on healthy ways to feed themselves given rations and food/money shortages. Being relatively cheap and not rationed (while sugar was rationed to 8 ounces per adult per week), carrot recipes were a common occurrence on the Kitchen Front. A Carrot Tart recipe was broadcast in 1941, only requiring prunes, carrots and pastry (Appendix G). The notable absence of sugar and fat (other than for the pastry) is highly telling of the massive food shortages and rationing of the time, and the desire to keep up with making desserts despite it all. The addition of prunes is another way to get around using sugar. A Carrot Pudding recipe that was aired is similarly paltry with indulgences, using mostly carrots, currants and sultanas for sweeteners and just 1 oz. of sugar. The fat used is suet, unlike the more luxurious butter and cream in previous centuries' recipes, and the only cooking required is boiling the mix.

Carrot cake experienced its most recent surge in popularity in the 1970s in the U.S., when it was one of the top five fad foods of the decade, according to Food Network. This popularity may have been due to the health food movement of the 1970s, as the recipes were mostly found in women's lifestyle magazines such as *McCall's* and *Woman's Day*. As Alan Davidson states, "they are perceived as 'healthy' cakes, a perception fortified by the use of brown sugar and wholemeal flour and the inclusion of chopped nuts, and only slightly compromised by the cream cheese and sugar icing which appears on some versions." This cream cheese frosting ironically may actually be the other reason for its recent popularity. Philadelphia Cream Cheese began growing and releasing many ads and recipes pamphlets in the 60s and 70s, making carrot cake and cream cheese frosting an inseparable pair. From this time on, carrot cake recipes were rarely seen without the cream cheese frosting topping. The combination, allowing its eaters to indulge the creamy and sugary frosting while convincing themselves that the nuts and carrots made carrot cake a health-conscious choice, may have secured its place in both the hearts and stomachs of the people.

Carrot desserts have played many roles throughout the years: from replacing sugar with the abundance of carrots, to claiming to help people see in the dark, to being a "healthy" dessert option. These desserts have maintained their popularity, telling stories about war and food shortages, medicinal priorities and the perception of health and society along the way.

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APPENDIX

A.

Khabis al-jazar (Carrots): (A carrot pudding)

Choose fresh tender and sweet carrots. Peel them and thinly slice them crosswise. For each pound of honey use 3 pounds of these carrots. Boil the honey and remove its froth. Pound the carrot in a stone mortar. Set a clean copper cauldron with a rounded bottom on a trivet on the fire, and put in it the skimmed honey and carrots. Cook the mixture on medium fire until the carrots fall apart.

Add walnut oil to the pot. For each pound of honey used add 2/3 cup of oil. Pistachio oil will be the best for it, but you can also use fresh oil of almond or sesame. Add the oil before the honey starts to thicken. However you do not need to stir the pot. You only scrape the bottom gently when mixture starts to thicken to prevent it from sticking to it. To check for doneness, use a stick or a spoon to see whether the pudding is thick enough or not yet.

When pudding becomes thick, put the pot down, and spread the dessert on a copper platter. Set it aside to cool down before serving. It will be firm and delicious.

Carrot Drink to warm up the kidneys and invigorate coitus:

Slice the carrots like coins, put them in a pot, and pour on them an equal amount of water. Let them cook until done then strain the liquid and discard the dregs. In a clean pot, combine two parts of the strained carrot juice and one part honey. Boil the mixture until one third of it evaporates. Add a small amount of mace and nutmeg. Set it aside for days then use it. It is a beneficial drink, God Willing.

- *Kitab al-Ṭabīḥ* by Ibn Sayyar al-Warraḡ, 950 AD

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B.

To make a pudding in a Carret root. Take your Carret root and scrape it fair, then take a fine knife and cut out all the meat that is within the roote, and make it hollow, then make your pudding stuffe of the liver of a gooce or of a Pig, with grated bread, Corance, Cloves and mace, Dates, Pepper, Salt and Sugar, chop your Liver very small, and perboile it ere you chop it, so doon, put it in your hollow root. As for the broth, take mutton broth with corance, carets sliste, salt, whole Mace, sweet Butter, Vergious and grated bread, and so serve it forth upon sippets.

- *A Book of Cookrye* gathered by A. W., 1591

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C.

Pudding of Carrot. Pare off some of the Crust of Manchet-Bread, and grate of half as much of the rest as there is of the Root, which must also be grated: Then take half a Pint of fresh Cream or New Milk, half a Pound of fresh Butter, six new laid Eggs (taking out three of the Whites)

mash and mingle them well with the Cream and Butter: Then put in the grated Bread and Carrot, with near half a Pound of Sugar; and a little Salt; some grated Nutmeg and beaten Spice; and pour all into a convenient Dish or Pan, butter'd, to keep the Ingredients from sticking and burning; set it in a quick Oven for about an Hour, and so have you a Composition for any Root-Pudding.

- *A Perfect School of Instructions For the Officers of the Mouth* by Giles Rose, 1682

Rose, Giles. *A Perfect School of Instruction for Officers of the Mouth*. © EEBO Editions, ProQuest, 2010. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>

D.

A Carrot Pudding

Take a raw Carrot, scrape it very clean, then grate it, take half a Pound of the grated Carrot, and a Pound of grated Bread, beat up eight Eggs, leave out half the Whites, mix the Eggs with half a Pint of Cream, then stir in the Bread and Carrot, and half a Pound of fresh Butter melted, half a Pint of Sack, and three Spoonfuls of Orange-flower Water, a Nutmeg grated, sweeten to your Palate. Mix all well together; and if it is not thin enough, stir in a little new Milk or Cream. Let it be of a moderate Thickness, lay a Puff-paste all over the Dish, and pour in the Ingredients. Bake it, it will take an Hour's baking, or you may boil it; but then you must melt Butter, and put in White Wine and Sugar.

- *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* by Hannah Glasse, 1747

Glasse, Hannah. *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy: The Revolutionary 1805 Classic*. © Dover Publications, 2015. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>

E.

To Make Puddings of Carriotts

First cut the roots hollow as children scoope apples. Take out all the pale yellow. Take grated bread, 4 eggs, beat them well, some pounded cinnamon, sugar to yr taste, some currants. Mix all together. Stuf yr carriots. Put in the piece you cut of the top again. Boyle them in clarriot & strong greavy & a little sugar, a stick of cinnimon. When the are boiled thicken yr sauce with the whites & yolks of 2 eggs. So serve them. If for a change you may boyle them in water & nothing else. Serve them in butter, sack & sugar for sauce. Besur[e] serve them hot. This is the first course.

- *Unknown Ladies Cookbook*, 1690-1830

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F.

Carrot Cakes. — Gâteaux de Carottes.

Take twelve large carrots, the reddest possible, boil them in water with a little salt; take out the hearts and drain them; put them through the cullender into a stewpan; dry them upon the fire, as *pâte royale*; make a cream *pâtissière*; put in as much flour as it will take; add the carrots, with a little confected orange-flowers minced, three quarters of a pound of sifted sugar, four eggs one after another, six yolks, and a quarter of a pound of melted butter; mix all well; whip the whites; mix them in lightly; prepare a stewpan as for the *gâteau de riz*, three quarters of an hour before serving put it into the oven.

- *The Art of French Cookery* by A. B. Beauvilliers, 1827

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CARROT CAKE. Take a dozen large and very red carrots; scrape and boil them in water with a little salt. When done drain them, take out the hearts, and rub the rest through a bolting-cloth; put them in a stewpan and dry them over the fire. Make a *crème pâtissière* with about $\frac{1}{2}$ pint of milk, and when done mix it with the carrots. Add a pinch of minced orange-flower *pralinée*, $\frac{1}{4}$ lb. of powder sugar, 4 whole eggs; put in one at a time the yolks of 6 more and $\frac{1}{4}$ lb. of melted butter. Mix all these ingredients well together; whip up 6 whites to a froth, and stir them in by degrees. Butter a mould and put some crumb of bread in it. In a minute or two turn out all the bread, and three quarters of an hour before the cake is wanted pour this preparation into the mould and bake it. Serve it hot.

- *The Cook's Dictionary* by Richard Dolby, 1830

Dolby, Richard. *The Cook's Dictionary, and House-Keeper's Directory*. © Forgotten Books, 2016. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>

G.

Carrot Tart. For this you want;

1 lb. of prunes
 $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. of carrots
 pastry

I should allow $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. of flour, $\frac{1}{4}$ lb. of oatmeal and 3 oz. of fat. Then just make the pastry in the usual way. For the filling the prunes should be soaked for 24 hours. If they are the small rather hard kind, they should be cooked as well; but don't boil them - just bring them to the boil and then cook very slowly. Stone them and put them through the mincer with the raw carrot at the same time. You get the idea? Prunes and carrots mixed up together so that they make a nice smooth puree. This will make six very good helpings.

CARROT PUDDING

Mix $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. grated Carrot and $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. Flour, 6 oz. finely chopped Suet, 4 oz. Currants, 4 oz. Sultanas and 1 oz. Sugar. 1 tablespoonful Sherry or Brandy. Mix with water, and boil for 3 hours.

- *Kitchen Front* recipes, 1941

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