

King Cake

- 2 envelopes active dry yeast
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1/4 pound (1 stick) unsalted butter, melted
- 1-1/2 cups warm milk (about 110°F)
- 1/2 cup warm water
- 5 large egg yolks, at room temperature
- 4 1/2 cups bleached all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon grated lemon zest
- 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- 1 pound cream cheese, at room temperature
- 4 cups confectioner's sugar
- 1 plastic king cake baby or a pecan half
- 5 tablespoons milk, at room temperature
- 3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- Purple-, green-, and gold-tinted sugar sprinkles



Combine the yeast and granulated sugar in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with a dough hook. Add the melted butter and warm milk and warm water. Beat at low speed for 1 minute. With the mixer running, add the egg yolks, then beat for 1 minute at medium-low speed. Add the flour, salt, nutmeg, and lemon zest and beat until everything is incorporated. Increase the speed to high and beat until the dough pulls away from the sides of the bowl, forms a ball, and starts to climb up the dough hook. If the dough is uncooperative in coming together, add a bit of warm water (110 degrees), a tablespoon at a time, until it does.

Remove the dough from the bowl. Using your hands, form the dough into a smooth ball. Lightly oil a bowl with the vegetable oil. Place the dough in the bowl and turn it to oil all sides. Cover with plastic wrap and set aside in a warm, draft-free place until doubled in size, about 2 hours.

Meanwhile, make the filling. In a large mixing bowl, combine the cream cheese and 1 cup of the confectioner's sugar. Blend by hand or with an electric mixer on low speed. Set aside.

Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured work surface. Using your fingers, pat it out into a rectangle about 30 inches long and 6 inches wide.

Spread the filling lengthwise over the bottom half of the dough, then flip the top half of the dough over the filling. Seal the edges, pinching the dough together. Shape the dough into a cylinder and place it on the prepared baking sheet seam side down. Shape the dough into a ring and pinch the ends together so there isn't a seam. Insert the king cake baby or pecan half into the ring from the bottom so that it is completely hidden by the dough.

Cover the ring with plastic wrap or a clean kitchen towel and place in a warm, draft-free place. Let the dough rise until doubled in size, about 45 minutes.

Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 350°F.

Brush the top of the risen cake with 2 tablespoons of the milk. Bake until golden brown, 25 to 30 minutes. Remove from the oven and let cool completely on a wire rack.

Make the icing. Combine the remaining 3 tablespoons milk, the lemon juice, and the remaining 3 cups confectioner's sugar in medium-size mixing bowl. Stir to blend well. With a rubber spatula, spread the icing evenly over the top of the cake. Sprinkle with the sugar crystals, alternating colors around the cake. The cake is traditionally cut into 2-inch-thick slices with all the guests in attendance.

YIELD: 20 to 22 servings

Ernie & Cindy were first introduced to the tradition of the King Cake on one of their visits to New Orleans as youth ministry leaders in their church. The Mardi Gras season begins on January 6th, also known to Christians as "Epiphany". As a symbol of the Holy Day of Epiphany, a tiny plastic baby representing the Christ Child is hidden inside and oval shaped bakery delicacy that is rich in both flavor and history. The King cake is decorated in the three Mardi Gras colors that have certain historical and symbolic significance. Green stands for "Faith" and is the color for the first day of Mardi Gras that falls on Epiphany and honors the Wise Men who visited the Christ Child. GOLD stands for "Power" and hors the day of Transfiguration, which is during this time. PURPLE symbolizes "Justice". A small plastic baby is hidden inside the King Cake when it is baked. At a party the cake is sliced and served and each person looks to see if their piece contains the "Baby". A chant of "I've got the baby!" means that person is obligated to supply the next cake. Cakes are brought to offices, school, meetings, and parties, and the tradition of the person finding the baby encourages the celebration to continue. The King Cake Tradition is thought to have been brought to New Orleans from France in 1870. King Cakes are only available during the Season of Epiphany, which is January 6th through the day before Lent.