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The Queen of Sheba

Serves 12 to 14

If I had not jotted down a few notes occasionally over the forty years or so that I have been making this cake, I might not recognize quite how much it has evolved. Today I like the cake best with stronger chocolate: I often use 66% or 70% chocolate and a little less butter and flour than before. Instead of the original blanched almonds, I now use whole almonds with skins because they have more flavor. Mission almonds, although small and homely to look at, are especially flavorful and worth seeking out.

Making this cake so often, I noticed that this type of batter sometimes cools and stiffens (like cement!) making it difficult to fold in the egg whites. So I changed the mixing procedure to avoid that problem: I beat the egg whites, then fold the flour and nuts into the batter along with the first addition of egg whites.

The cake is rich and magnificent unadorned, although it can be dressed up with chocolate glaze (see below). However, I love it best "naked" with a little whipped cream or Cocoa Bean Cream. The former is a dramatic counterpoint that heightens the impact of the bittersweet chocolate; the latter is subtler, more complex, and very sophisticated.

INGREDIENTS:

6 ounces (170 grams) 66% to 70% chocolate, coarsely chopped
10 tablespoons (140 grams/1-1/4 sticks) unsalted butter, cut into pieces
3 tablespoons brandy
1/8 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup (2-1/2 ounces/70 grams) unblanched whole almonds
2 tablespoons (15 grams) all-purpose flour
4 large eggs, separated, at room temperature
3/4 cup (150 grams) sugar
1/8 teaspoon cream of tartar

Powdered sugar for dusting (optional)
Lightly sweetened whipped cream or Cocoa Bean Cream
Or, Sarah Bernhardt Chocolate Glaze (below)

DIRECTIONS:

- Position a rack in the lower third of the oven and preheat the oven to 375°F. Unless you are planning to serve the cake on the pan bottom, line the cake pan with a circle of parchment paper.

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- Place the chocolate and butter in a medium heatproof bowl in a wide skillet of barely simmering water. Stir occasionally until nearly melted. Remove from the heat and stir until melted and smooth. Or microwave on Medium (50%) power for about 2 minutes, then stir until completely melted and smooth. Stir in the brandy, almond extract, if using, and salt. Set aside.
- Meanwhile, pulse the nuts and flour in a food processor until the mixture has the texture of cornmeal. Set aside.
- In a large bowl, whisk the egg yolks with 1/2 cup (100 grams) of the sugar until well blended. Stir in the chocolate mixture. Set aside.
- In a clean, dry bowl, with an electric mixer, beat the egg white and cream of tartar at medium speed until soft peaks form when the beaters are lifted. Gradually sprinkle in the remaining 1/4 cup (50 grams) sugar and beat at high speed (or medium-high speed in a heavy-duty mixer) until the peaks are stiff but not dry. Scoop one-quarter of the egg whites and all of the nut mixture on top of the chocolate batter, and using a large rubber spatula, fold them in. Scrape the remaining egg whites onto the batter and fold together. Turn the batter into the prepared pan, spreading it level if necessary.
- Bake for 25 to 30 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted about 1-1/2 inches from the edge emerges almost clean but a toothpick inserted in the center is still moist and gooey. Set the pan on a rack to cool. (The cooled torte can be covered tightly with plastic wrap, or removed from the pan and wrapped well, and stored at room temperature for up to 3 days or frozen for up to 3 months. Bring to room temperature before serving.)
- To serve, slide a slim knife around the inside of the pan to loosen the cake. Remove the pan sides and transfer the cake, on the pan bottom, to a platter, or invert the cake onto a rack or tray, remove the bottom and the paper liner, and invert onto a platter. Using a fine-mesh strainer, sift a little powdered sugar over the top of the cake before serving, if desired. Serve each slice with a little whipped cream.

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT:

8-by-3-inch springform pan or cheesecake pan with a removable bottom

CHOCOLATE NOTE:

For a less bittersweet cake, use a 60% or 62% chocolate and increase the flour to 1/4 cup (30 grams). Bake for 5 to 10 minutes longer, if necessary.

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Sarah Bernhardt Chocolate Glaze

Makes 1-2/3 cups

I designed this thin bittersweet-chocolate-and-butter pouring glaze for my version of Sarah Bernhardt pastries, which were wildly popular at Cocolat. I use it on all kinds of cakes and desserts that require refrigeration because it does not harden to the point of cracking when chilled, and, if it is applied at the correct temperature, it stays beautiful even when cold. I use it on the Tribute Cake and Julia's Cake, in place of the usual sweet fondant glaze on chocolate éclairs, and as a substitute for the pure chocolate coating on Coconut Saras.

INGREDIENTS:

8 ounces (225 grams) 54% to 72% chocolate, cut into bits
12 tablespoons (170 grams/1-1/2 sticks) unsalted butter, cut into several pieces
1 tablespoon light corn syrup
5 teaspoons water
Pinch of salt

DIRECTIONS:

Place the chocolate, butter, corn syrup, and water in a small heatproof bowl set in a wide skillet of barely simmering water and stir frequently until the chocolate is almost completely melted; do not overheat. Remove the glaze from the water bath and set aside to finish melting, stirring once or twice until perfectly smooth. Or, melt in a microwave on Medium (50%) power for about 2 minutes. Stir gently with a spatula or a wooden spoon until completely smooth; do not whisk or beat. Taste and consider adding the salt. To use for crumb coating a cake before glazing it, let cool, without stirring, to a soft frosting consistency. To use as glaze, reheat gently in a pan of hot water (or let cool if just made) to 88°F to 90°F (for optimal shine) before pouring. (The glaze can be kept, covered and refrigerated, for up to 2 weeks; or freeze it in a sealed container for up to 6 months. Soften or defrost in a pan of hot water or in the microwave.)

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT:

Instant-read thermometer

CHOCOLATE NOTE:

You can use an even higher percentage chocolate than called for, but be sure you taste it first so you know what you are getting into.