

CHRISTMAS CHOCOLATE CAKE



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We met Hala in Damascus working on a theatre project there. Hala absolutely loves this cake. It's a Christmas season special, and her family calls it 'Disappearing Cake' because, mysteriously, you take it out of the oven near anyone with taste buds and it does exactly that.

Every year Hala's mum would go to the old man's shop that sells everything and buy the decoration for the cake – little colourful Smartie-like sweets – and ever since that image has become embedded in her mind as the definitive cake. 'I have tried French, Italian and English cakes but the one in my head is always that one' she admits. Hala hasn't cooked Disappearing Cake since she arrived in England. 'I am not ready for the rush of memories just yet.'

SERVES 8

225g plain flour
250g caster sugar
1 tsp baking powder
1 tsp bicarbonate soda
6½ tsp cocoa powder
3 eggs, beaten
1 tsp vanilla essence
zest of 1 orange
250ml milk
200ml vegetable oil
150ml freshly squeezed orange juice

FOR THE ICING

150g dark or milk chocolate
150ml double cream

Heat the oven to 180°C/350°F/Gas mark 4 and line a 23cm round, springform cake tin, or a 35 x 30cm Christmas tree tin, with greaseproof paper.

Put all the dry ingredients into one large bowl. Beat the eggs with the vanilla and the zest, add the rest of the liquid ingredients, then fold in the dry ingredients.

Transfer to the cake tin and bake in the oven for 40-50 minutes or until a skewer inserted into the middle comes out clean. Leave to cool in the tin, then transfer to a wire rack to cool completely.

For the icing, melt the chocolate and the cream in a saucepan over a low heat. Whisk very well and set aside to cool and thicken for around half an hour. Once it is thick, spread over the cooled cake and decorate as you wish.

Taken from Syria: Recipes From Home by Itab Azzam and Dina Mousawi published by Trapeze in hardback at £20, ebook £10.99

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