

New Orleans King Cake

by Nick Gosey

Revision 3.3, 02.08.20133

Prep time: 3 hours or overnight + 6 hours

Bake time: 30 minutes

Servings: 12

A brief history

While the king cake is most famously known in America as a New Orleans Mardi Gras tradition, it actually has its roots in European Christmas and Epiphany traditions. The New Orleans version is traditionally a braided brioche style bread (say that 10 times fast!) topped with icing and colored sugars in the traditional Mardi Gras colors: purple, green, and gold. Many bakeries in New Orleans have been creating filled versions for decades, as well.

A small plastic baby (or nut) is hidden inside the cake. Traditionally, whoever finds the baby is crowned the king or queen of the Mardi Gras party. In modern times king cakes begin showing up at office parties, schools, and family gatherings immediately following Epiphany (a nod to the cake's historical origins as an Epiphany tradition; also, Epiphany marks the beginning of the "Mardi Gras season" and parade season in New Orleans) and the person who gets the baby is usually required to bring the king cake the following week.

Notes on this recipe

Do not let the length of this recipe dissuade you from making it. It really is quite easy, it just takes a bit of advance planning and time.

This recipe uses a sponge, which is a French style of preferment. Some of the flour and water and all of the yeast are mixed together in advance and allowed to ferment for a time. This develops a more yeasty flavor in the finished product as well as change the texture of the final product. This is similar, though not the same, as a sourdough starter.

The sponge can be made the night before and put in the refrigerator to slow it down until you are ready to use it. I am unsure how long the sponge will continue living in the refrigerator, but I have used it after 36-48 hours with no ill effects.

I use a Kitchen Aid mixer with a dough hook. Any mixer powerful enough to knead bread will work for this. If you chose to knead the dough manually be prepared to get very messy, the dough is quite wet at the start. Reserve a small portion of the flour to use on your work surface as you don't want to add extra flour to the recipe. Kneading times will need to be extended, too.

I've included volume measurements just in case you don't have a kitchen scale, but I would encourage you to get a cheap scale that weighs in grams if you plan to do much baking. Flour, especially, can weigh very differently per unit of volume depending on the type of flour, moisture content, and measuring method. Weight is much more accurate and your breads will turn out so much better.

I use bread flour for this recipe as it has been milled from wheat with a higher gluten content to facilitate bread making. I like Gold Medal's Better for Bread, but any bread flour available to you should work just as well. The recipe should also work fine with all purpose flour.

Sponge

	<u>Metric</u>	<u>Imperial</u>	<u>Volume</u>
Bread flour:	65g	2 1/4 ounces	1/2 cup
Water:	58g	2 ounces	1/4 cup
Dry yeast	12g	3 teaspoons	

Mix ingredients together until they form a loose, sticky dough. Cover and let ferment 3 hours. Alternately: Cover and let ferment 30 minutes, then refrigerate overnight.

The finished product should be sticky and moist, with holes on the surface from escaping gas, and should smell strongly of yeast.

Dough

	<u>Metric</u>	<u>Imperial</u>	<u>Volume</u>
Large eggs:	3		
Lemon zest:	1 teaspoon (one lemon)		
Orange zest:	1 teaspoon (one orange)		
Nutmeg (fresh ground):	1 teaspoon		
Water:	28g	1 ounce	1 tablespoon
Dark rum (or water):	28g	1 ounce	1 tablespoon
Butter (cubed, softened):	114g	4 ounces	1 stick
Sugar (white):	100g	3 1/2 ounces	1/2 cup
Bread flour:	440g	15 1/2 ounces	3 1/2 cups
Salt:	1 1/2 teaspoons		

If you refrigerated the sponge, remove it from the refrigerator and let it rest, covered, for about 15 minutes. While the sponge is resting it is a good idea to pre-measure your other ingredients.

Mix everything except the flour, salt, and sponge together in a large mixing bowl. You can use the mixing attachment for this. Next, mix in the sponge. Finally, add the flour by small increments (thirds works well) and mix to combine. I find it works best to use a wooden spoon to mix at this stage. Cover with a damp towel or cheesecloth and allow dough to rest for 20 minutes. This allows the flour to hydrate and helps the gluten protein release some prior to kneading. (Figure 2.1)

Add salt and knead on medium low speed with a dough hook for 5-10 minutes. The dough will be sticky and soft and may stick to the bottom of the bowl but I haven't had any trouble with this dough sticking to the mixer or riding up the dough hook too much with a 5 quart bowl. When the dough is ready you should be able to poke the dough ball and watch it bounce back some, though it will still be far stickier than a regular yeast bread.

Place dough in a large greased or oiled bowl, cover with a damp towel cheesecloth put it in a warm place. I will often turn the oven on low for about a minute when I start kneading, then let the dough ferment in the oven. You don't want it to be hot, just warm. Allow to ferment for 1 hour.

Remove dough from bowl to a clean, dry work surface. The dough should be a little less sticky by now and I don't usually have much trouble with it sticking to the counter. Press the dough out flat to release the larger gas bubbles and spread it on the counter. Then, roll it up like a jelly roll. Finally, roll the dough up along the other axis to form a ball. Return dough to the greased bowl, cover, and let ferment for 1 hour.

Repeat the above flattening and rolling steps and return dough to the bowl for a final, 30 minute, ferment.

There are a few possibilities for the final shaping of the dough, depending on whether you will be filling it or not.

Simple ring

Remove the dough from the bowl and perform the flatten and roll one last time. Form dough into a tight ball then press it out a little, forming a thick, round disk. Press your thumb through the center of the dough and slowly expand the hole until it is 5-7 inches in diameter. Keep the ring of dough a uniform thickness all around. You can press a plastic baby, shelled nut, or large bean into the dough from the bottom at this time.

Braided ring

divide the dough evenly into three balls. roll each one into a uniformly thick rope 18-24 inches long. Braid the three strands together and then form a ring, joining the ends together. The baby can be pressed into bottom of the fully baked king cake.

Filled ring

flatten the dough out into a rectangle 4-6 inches wide and about 8 inches long, uniformly thick. Slowly expand the dough from the center out until it is 18-24 inches long, 4-6 inches wide, and uniformly thick. Don't let the dough get thinner than about a quarter inch.

Spread the filling in a thin layer on the top of the dough, leaving about 1 inch free of filling on one of the long sides of the dough and one short side. You can place the baby in with the filling. Roll the dough up like a jelly roll, rolling toward the bare side. Pinch together along the seam so it is well-sealed, carefully bring the two ends together, sealing the end you left free of filling over the other.

Carefully transfer the shaped ring to a parchment lined baking sheet. Cover lightly with another sheet of parchment and let it proof for 2 and a half to 3 hours. (The high sugar content in this dough causes the yeast to reproduce much slower than other breads, thus the extended final proof.)

Set the bottom rack to the lowest position and the top rack to the middle of your oven. Preheat oven to 375°f and boil some water (3-4 cups).

If you used the simple shaping method, slash the top of the ring 3 or 4 times, similar to the illustration 1, this controls the expansion of the dough. The other two shaping techniques don't require slashing.

Just before you put the king cake into the oven place a small baking pan on the lower rack and carefully fill it with boiling water. The steam from this will help create a thicker crust on the bread.

Bake for 15 minutes and then rotate the king cake. Finish baking another 10-15 minutes until golden brown. The internal temperature will read 190°f at the center. (Though, I'm not quite sure how various fillings will effect the temperature and I'm not sure how the braided design works, either.)

Remove the cake from the oven and allow to fully cool before icing.

Fillings

Cinnamon brown sugar

1/3 cup dark brown sugar
1-2 tablespoons fresh ground cinnamon
2 tablespoons butter, melted
2 tablespoons flour
1/2 cup chopped pecans (optional)

Mix everything except for the pecans together well. Spread evenly across surface of dough then add pecans on top of the mixture.

Cream cheese

8 ounces cream cheese, softened
1 tablespoon lemon juice
1/2 cup sugar

Whip ingredients together well then chill in the refrigerator for at least half an hour. Spread evenly across dough.

Ganache

4 ounces semi-sweet chocolate chips (or chopped chocolate)
4 ounces heavy cream
1 tablespoon butter
Optional:
1 tablespoon orange zest
2 teaspoons orange-flavored liqueur

In a small saucepan bring cream just to a boil. Remove from heat and add other ingredients. Let stand 3 minutes then whisk until chocolate is melted. Chill until cool, about 30 minutes. Beat until light and fluffy just before using (be careful not to overdo this or it can become grainy).

Icing