

New Orleans King Cake

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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 poolish (also referred to as 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 and will still be sticky by the end.

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 have been using all purpose flour recently because it is easier to find, but bread flour will make a better, chewier final product so if you can, use that.

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 3-4 hours. Alternately: Cover and let ferment 30 minutes, then refrigerate overnight. If you opt to refrigerate the sponge remove it from the fridge and let it come to room temperature. It helps to warm an oven (not over 100°F, just turn the oven on for a couple of minutes and then turn it off) if your kitchen is on the cool side (under 75°F, really).

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

If you refrigerated the sponge remove it and allow to warm. While waiting on the sponge to warm, or any time while you are letting it ferment on the counter, get all your ingredients together and pre-measured (mise en place, as the French say). It helps to have the butter and eggs at room temperature before starting.

Using the whisk attachment for your mixer, or a whisk, mix the sugar and butter together. Add eggs one at a time, followed by citrus zests, nutmeg, water, and rum (or optional water), and salt.

Slowly add in the flour while mixing with the paddle attachment on low or a wooden spoon. 4-5 installments should work. Once the dough starts to come together into a sticky paste change to the bread hook attachment and kneed for about 8 minutes, stopping occasionally to scrape down the sides and bottom of the bowl. If you are kneeding by hand you may want to kneed in a large bowl at the start as this dough is extremely sticky.

Once the dough has become elastic and is more tacky than sticky scrape it out of the bowl onto a clean counter top and kneed manually a few times. If your dough is still very sticky/goeey you may need to add additional flour. (Both the humidity of the air and the moisture level of your flour effect this.) Form dough into a tight ball.

Place dough in a large greased or oiled bowl, cover. Place in the refrigerator overnight.

Remove the dough from the refrigerator to warm at least an hour in advance of when you want to start shaping the dough. You can plan for about 30 minutes shaping, 10-15 minutes to let it rest, and 30 minutes baking time. Warm your oven and then turn it off and allow the dough to warm in the oven.

Once the dough is warm remove it from the bowl and fold it. (Press it out into a disc, fold it over like a letter three times, then fold it three times in the other direction.) Form into a ball and return to the bowl, return bowl to the oven. Allow 30 minutes to an hour to continue coming up to temperature. If you will be filling your cake prepare the filling now.

There are a few possibilities for the final shaping of the dough, depending on whether you will be filling it or not. With all of these it can help to let the dough rest for a minute while shaping, allowing the gluten to relax. Think of shaping this like shaping pizza dough.

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, for wetter fillings cover about one inch of the surface with filling along one long side, dryer fillings (cinnamon sugar) you can cover a larger area, leaving about 1 inch free of filling on one of the long sides of the dough. You can place the baby in with the filling. Roll the dough up like a jelly roll, rolling toward the bare side. With the wetter fillings be careful when you roll not to squeeze out the filling. If you get cream cheese, genache, or jelly on the part of the dough that needs to stay dry it will become messy and hard to seal. 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. Allow the cake to rest for 30 minutes to an hour.

While the dough rests. 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 (2-3 cups).

If you used the simple shaping method, slash the top of the ring a few times at an angle to the tube of dough, 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 cake 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.

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

Make a simple icing with powdered sugar, a bit of lemon juice, and enough water to make it pourable but not very runny.