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ASK AUNT DAISY

Traditional Recipes



LETTERS asking me about traditional recipes are quite frequent and very interesting. There was one about making apple dumplings with bread-dough instead of pastry; another about lardy cakes; and another about the famous simnel cake for Easter. A letter appeared in the Mailbag about the simnel cake, asking where I got the idea of the white icing and the "little fluffy chickens," and putting forward the theory that simnel cake was baked for Mothering Sunday. As a matter of fact, the correspondent and I were both right about the simnel, for traditional recipes and customs vary according to times and places.

I got my recipe in London in 1935 from the lady who had been commissioned by the BBC to visit farms in different counties, collecting characteristic ways of cooking, and it came from Gloucestershire. The other recipe is probably much older and, I think, it is less adapted to our readers' needs. It was a rich fruit cake, made for Mothering Sunday (Low Sunday), which was the only day in the year allowed for apprentices to go home for the day. I have the information from a lady now in Wellington, who was educated at a very strict and historical church school in England. The mass of the people in olden days were working folks and poor, and the boys and girls were mostly apprenticed for a period of years and had few treats. On Mothering Sunday they were allowed to go home to see mother.

The story of Simon and Nell is authentic. Simon wanted a boiled cake like a cold Christmas pudding, but Mother Nell wanted a baked one. So she boiled it first, then cut it through the middle, put in a good layer of almond paste, and then put the top half on again. A ring of almond paste was put round the top of the cake, which was then put in the oven to bake. The almond in the middle flavoured the whole.

Mothers' Day is a quite different occasion, originating in America with the idea of stimulating the young people to set aside one Sunday a year for specially remembering Mother with a gift (and a letter, too, if far away)—a very good custom for both the mother and children. Birthdays may slip by unremembered sometimes, but Mother's Day has become a national institution.

Simnel Biscuits (1)

These are a kind of shortbread, and were often called Easter cakes. The recipe was sent from Essex: Eight ounces flour, 2 oz. butter, 2 oz. lard, 1 fresh egg, 1 heaped tablespoonful castor sugar, ½ teacupful currants, pinch of salt, 2 tablespoonfuls ground almonds, 1 or 2 tablespoonfuls of milk. Pour the flour into a bowl, add the salt, then rub in the butter and lard, handling it as lightly as possible. Mix in the almonds, currants and sugar. Beat the egg, add very little milk, and pour into the contents of the bowl, stirring lightly with the blade of a knife. Turn out on to a floured board. Roll very thin, stamp into rounds with a cutter, place on a shallow tin, and bake for 20 minutes in a moderate oven, turning once during the process. Dust thickly with castor sugar before serving.

Simnel Biscuits (2)

Another version, without almond flavouring, sent by an Auckland settler: Three ounces butter, 1 cup flour, ½ teaspoon cinnamon, ½ cup chopped sultanas, ¼ cup sugar, 1 teaspoon baking

powder, ½ teaspoon nutmeg, a little milk if needed. Cream the butter and sugar, add the dry ingredients and a little milk if needed. Roll out, cut into squares. Bake about 10 minutes in moderate oven.

Friday's Pie (Yorkshire)

This is claimed to be "good and cheap, and will harm nobody." It contains no meat—which accounts for its name. Two pounds of potatoes, 1 lb. of onions, 1 pint of milk, butter, pepper and salt to taste, and pastry to cover. A large piedish should be smeared with butter, then a layer of potatoes put into it. Cover with a layer of sliced onions, another layer of potatoes, followed by a layer of onions until the piedish is full. Each layer must be sprinkled liberally with pepper and salt, and have just a smearing of butter spread over it. Pour in the milk and put into the oven and cook for 20 minutes. Have a good short pastry ready, cover the pie and bake again for half an hour. The pastry is made with 4 oz. of butter to ½ lb. flour.

Leeky Pie (Cornwall)

Leeks, bacon, cream, pepper. Cut the white stems of 4 leeks into small slices ¼-inch thick. Then cut 4 slices of the green part. Cover with boiling water, leave 20 minutes. Drain the water and repeat the scalding. Drain again. Place a layer of leeks in a piedish, cover with slices of bacon, sprinkle with pepper. Repeat till dish is full. Cover the pie with short crust. Bake 1¼ hours. Lift pastry off and stir in ½ a cupful of thick cream. Replace crust. Return to the oven for 10 minutes. Serve.

Cornish Pasty

Good short pastry, raw potato, raw swede or turnip, uncooked good beef steak, suet, pepper and salt. Roll out a round of pastry about the same thickness as for a fruit tart. Sprinkle with pepper and salt. Place 2 handfuls of chopped-up raw potato and swede on one half of the pastry; then spread a layer of small pieces of meat. Grate over a small piece of suet, sprinkle with pepper and salt. Top with a little more vegetable. Fold the pastry over, pinch the two edges together so that the join is on the side of the pastry. Brush over with egg. Bake for 1 hour—that is, ½ hour in a hot oven, ½ an hour just cooking. If onion is added to the potato in a pasty, then swede or turnip is left out.

Honesome (Shropshire)

This is the quaint name given to a favourite breakfast which needs no preparation. Actually it is wholemeal bread spread first with butter, then with honey and topped with cheese. To those who have not tried it, it may sound too frivolous a mixture. It is really a fascinating and sustaining summer breakfast.

Douglas Honey Cake

Quarter of a pound of flour, ¼ lb. castor sugar, ¼ lb. butter, 1 teaspoon baking powder, 4 oz. ground almonds, 2 well-beaten eggs, ½ teacup of honey. Sift the baking powder into the flour, add half the ground almonds. Cream the butter and sugar together, add the well-beaten eggs and stir in gradually the

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