**Queenie Cooks Column Entry**

*#1*

**Queenie Cooks: Critter Cakes**

I am calling this column “Critter Cakes” because we used a novelty pan with all sorts of “identified” flying things to have some fun with food this week. Yes, this week Queenie is all about the decorations, and with their dragonfly and bumblebee and butterfly and ladybug shapes, these cakelets – which were the centerpiece for a birthday party for four-year-old twins - are just about perfect for Easter or any springtime celebration.

I find little shaped cakes like this such fun to make that I have a whole collection of novelty pans with shapes ranging from antique cars to flowers to trains to hearts to bunnies to Christmas trees to holiday wreaths to autumn leaves to acorns to little ducklings to baby chicks to, well, you get the idea.

It’s not that I am that clever at cake decoration. It’s more because I’m not, or, at least, that I’m not patient enough to spend hours carving and/or piping icing onto cakes to make the kind of elaborate edible works of art that real cake decorators concoct. For example, I will never forget the time my sister baked and stacked 9 round cake layers and created a culinary masterpiece that looked exactly like a can of Mountain Dew right down to a pop top made of silver icing for our niece. I loved it, but I would not even be tempted to try making anything like that.

So, like I was saying, this week is not as much about the specific shape of your creation – and you certainly can make very clever shaped cakes without a novelty pan - as it is about letting go, using your imagination, and having fun with food. Specifically, in this case, it’s all about how a couple of sisters made something special that two lively four-year-olds would find fun and tasty without mountains of sugary icing to send their little bodies into orbit.

That’s right. I cannot even take credit for making these as I only supplied the pan and a willing sweet tooth for the finished product. My other very creative sister came up with the idea of making our nephew and niece, Colten and Chloe, birthday treats from an old tried and true white cake recipe and then decorating them with just a few squiggles of icing and some brightly colored fresh fruit. The cakelets were perfect, at least to two precocious four-year-olds. Their little eyes just lit up when they saw their Birthday table!

As for the recipe she used, I cannot over-emphasize how delicious these were. To be honest, lacking novelty pans you probably could make some fun-to-decorate little cakes from a box of cake mix… maybe? But A) this white cake recipe really is particularly tasty and B) if you do have/use novelty pans, the texture that results from this recipe makes the individual cakelets hold up well when it is time to remove them from the pan, so you do not have to worry about breakage.

When it was time to decorate them, knowing that the twins love fresh fruit we just washed and dried some raspberries, blueberries, and green grapes, whipped up a little yellow and green and white icing, and started having fun! You could use strawberries, mandarin orange slices, slices of kiwi, and wouldn’t flakes of coconut give a nice feathery or furry look to little birds or other critters? If you were not concerned about sugar you could decorate with favorite candies and a great deal more icing in elaborate designs if so inclined.

Actually, my favorite of all that we made was a little bumblebee that we just dusted with powdered sugar to highlight the details on its body and wings and added raspberries to his little toothpick antennae!

The twins just loved the critter party, and I loved the way their eyes lit up when they saw the table! We thought we were being so clever with our healthier treats! Convinced that we had really pulled it off, we invited them to each select their favorite and chow down. Chloe immediately chose a delicate butterfly with tiny yellow and green and white swirls of icing gracing its wings. Colten, on the other hand, bypassed all the critters and went straight for one of the plain, round cakes mounded with icing that we had made from leftover batter. And when he finished licking the icing off the top, he was ready for another!

Anyway, below is the recipe for the cake – which really is quite special. And since right now I think we all need a little more fun in our lives, I do hope these “critters” will inspire you to think of ways that you can as much fun playing with your food as we did while making these. Enjoy!

Plain White Cake (perfect for cake molds)

Start with all ingredients at room temperature – about 70 degrees. Preheat oven to 375.

SIFT BEFORE MEASURING

2 1/4 cups cake flour

RESIFT WITH

2 ½ teaspoons double acting baking powder

½ teaspoon salt.

CREAM TOGETHER UNTIL FLUFFY

1 ¼ Cup sugar

½ Cup butter

COMBINE

1 Cup milk

1 teaspoon vanilla

ADD SIFTED INGREDIENTS TO BUTTER MIXTURE IN THREE PARTS, ALTERNATING WITH THE COMBINED LIQUIDS. STIR BATTER UNTIL SMOOTH AFTER EACH ADDITION.

WHIP UNTIL STIFF BUT NOT DRY

4 egg whites (only, no yolks)

LIGHTLY FOLD WHIPPED EGG WHITES INTO THE BATTER AND BAKE ABOUT 25 minutes for layers, less for cakelet molds.

WHEN THOROUGHLY COOLED, FROST, DUST WITH POWDERED SUGAR, and/or DECORATE WITH FRESH FRUIT.

*#2*

**Queenie Cooks: Perfect Almond Joy Cookies**

“Sometimes you feel like a nut. Sometimes you don’t!” This popular jingle from 1970 pretty well summed up the Almond Joy vs Mounds Bar debate that had been going on for decades. Well, I don’t know all that much about the history of the two, but with the combination of the sweetened flake coconut and the semi-sweet chocolate, these Almond Joy Cookies really are a perfect blend of the best of both. And I guarantee these little bits of heaven will have a long-lasting place in my future! So, if you love cook-IES but are not always a fan of cook-ING, prepare to love me, because today I am sharing how, with four simple ingredients, a bowl, a spoon, and a cookie sheet, you can have your own Almond Joy Cookies, cooked, cooled, and ready to eat in 20 minutes - and they really are heavenly!!!

First, let me say that I have had Almond Joy cookies before. And they were good. In fact, I’ve MADE Almond Joy cookies before, by more than one recipe. All were good. But not THIS good. And that’s important to me. True story: I have loved Almond Joy candy bars ever since I can remember, and they always make me think of my Daddy, because he loved them, too. I remember talking with him about Almond Joys vs Mounds. I loved the moist sweetness of the coconut in both, but just wished I could have the darker chocolate of the Mounds (as compared to the milk chocolate of the Almond Joy) AND the toasted almonds. Well, the semi-sweet chocolate chips in this recipe takes care of that nicely and the blend is just as perfect as I always knew it would be.

Ready for a surprise? Not only are they truly among the very best things I ever put into my mouth, they are also – drum roll - made without eggs, flour, or butter. There’s also no beating, chilling, rolling, or cutting involved. You don’t even need a mixer! Just dump sweetened, flake coconut, chocolate chips, toasted almonds, and sweetened condensed milk in a big bowl, stir it all up, drop bits on a cookie sheet, bake, and cool. That’s it!

There are two specific items that make these even easier to prepare. One - parchment paper – I’d call a requirement, because if you use waxed paper or something else they just don’t turn out the same. I don’t pretend to know what difference it makes, but you can trust me that it does. The other is a cookie scoop. I only discovered those a few years ago, and if you’re not familiar with them, think miniature ice-cream scoops. I picked up a set of four different sized ones for less than $10 in a grocery store, and I’ll never again bake cookies – or anything else that requires individual bits of batter (like cupcakes) – without them. With no pause to measure (or eyeball) individual amounts of batter or dough, you just scoop and drop, scoop and drop, and in no time you have row after row of uniform-sized perfection.

It really is that simple. Just bake your little bits of perfection for 12 to 14 minutes – until the bottoms and the coconut tips begin to look a beautiful golden brown – and you’re done! There are only other steps you MIGHT consider (I did not) if you like. One would be doing a bit of shaping with moistened fingertips before baking them so they have a rounder shape, because with no rising, spreading or falling, they will come out of the oven just like they went in. But I prefer – and recommend – the added crunchiness and eye-appeal of the irregular shape and texture of these just as they come out of the scoop - or spoon. The other possibility is, if you want to get really fancy, you can drizzle some melted chocolate across the tops. But to me, the balance of tastes in this recipe is already perfect, and they’re so pretty that I thought the drizzled tops would be a classic case of gilding the lily.

As for the taste, I don’t even know how, adequately, to describe it. The combination of the slightly crunchy outsides and the gooey, yummy insides? Bliss! In fact, when I shared some with my siblings, we quickly started playing “If I get up and walk to the kitchen to pick up each cookie individually, I’m burning the calories, so it’s ok to eat as many as I want.” I take that back. SOME of “us” did that. I was unabashedly grabbing them two at a time, because they truly are that good. I promise. If you like coconut, you will LOVE these! And so will everyone you know. In fact, if you want to be the most popular person at any type gathering, just show up with a batch of these. They’d also make great hostess gifts, sealed in an air-tight container. (Otherwise, our Southern humidity would reduce the crunchiness of the outsides.)

So, there you have it – one of the simplest “look-like-you-spent-forever-on-making-them” sweet treats you will ever find anywhere. And as for the “sometimes you feel like a nut” aspect, well, ok, you could make these without the nuts if you had an allergy issue and they would still be delicious! But for anyone who likes coconut and chocolate and toasted almonds? These are the best!!! Enjoy!

**Perfect (And perfectly simple) Almond Joy Cookies**

Prep Time 5 mins Cook Time 12 mins Makes 3 dozen

2 cups semi-sweet chocolate chips

1 (14 oz) bag sweetened coconut flakes

2/3 cup chopped lightly salted almonds (you can buy these ready to eat)

1 (14 oz) can sweetened condensed milk

While your oven is preheating to 325, cover two large cookie sheets or jelly roll pans with parchment paper. Pour your four ingredients in a very large bowl and stir together until everything is well-mixed and coated. Scoop out the mixture onto your parchment-topped cookie sheets. (You can use a spoon, but seriously – it is worth investing in a small cookie scoop, because you definitely will want to make these again and again.) Flatten the tops slightly with moistened fingertips. Bake until edges and coconut tips begin to brown – about 12-14 minutes. Cool completely on the pans and enjoy!

NOTES: Store cookies in an airtight container.

*#3*

**Queenie Cooks – Strawberry Short-Sheet Cake**

***~ Fantastic, crowd-pleasing dessert with a side tip on turning flops to tops! ~***

Anyone who cooks knows that one of the best ways to feed a crowd is with Sheet Cakes. But for our extended family’s first chance to get together after over a year mostly in quarantine, I wasn’t about to serve just any old thing for our Easter Sunday picnic this year. So, I decided to make a Strawberry Sheet Cake from a recipe I had found that sounded really tasty and a strawberry cream cheese buttercream frosting recipe that sounded so good that I could not wait to taste it! It started with a doctored boxed cake mix (Don’t judge! Those can be delicious time-savers!) recipe that sounded like a favorite that one of my friends makes, so I quickly gathered all the needed ingredients got busy!

The good news is that I was thrilled when the last piece went to an adorable three-year-old niece, a notoriously picky eater, who came up with big, sad eyes - holding out an empty plate - (think, Oliver!) for a slice of her own after tasting her Daddy’s! And on that Sunday, as we were all picnicking out on my sister’s back deck, this Strawberry Short-Sheet Cake was the dessert that everyone from age three to almost-ninety loved so much that I ended up with only berry-juice-soaked crumbs left in the pan. In fact, it was so luscious and moist that someone even scraped those up last juicy crumbs with a rubber spatula!

The not-so-good news is that when I was baking that cake base, I forgot to allow for shorter baking time in a dark pan. So, while I was blissfully writing down the hall, my base cake got soundly scorched. I did not realize there was a problem when I first took it out, thinking that it was “just nice and slightly-past golden brown,” so I went on with other preparations until just a couple of hours before time to leave. It was when I went back to the completely cooled cake for “last minute” frosting that realized I had a problem.

When I examined it closely, I determined that while it was a much darker brown on top than I would have liked it was not black, nor did it actually taste burned. But when I flipped it out of the pan, the bottom and the edges were enough darker that I was not about to risk trying to cover that up with icing.

Worse yet, it was very dry - and I hate a dry cake. Bottom line – there was no way that I would serve what I had at a family celebration, but I had absolutely no time to start from scratch and make anything else.

So, I quickly thought about what I had to work with, shifted into overdrive, then used my freezer and my trusty, long, serrated, bread knife to remedy the first part and harkened back to another family-favorite cake recipe – my famous triple layer Strawberry Tall Cake - for inspiration on how to fix the second part.

So, what did I do? Well, first, I dumped that 9x13 slab of almost muffin-dry cake out, covered it tightly with cling wrap, and stuck it in the freezer. Then, while that began to freeze, I pureed some more strawberries with just a touch of sugar and made up the frosting while. Finally, I took that now partially frozen cake from the freezer, shaved off the bottom and trimmed off about ½ inch around the sides with the bread knife, flipped it over and back into the now thoroughly washed and dried pan, liberally poked holes in the top of that cake with a grilling fork, and covered it all with the pureed strawberries – which, fortunately, were cold, as I had been keeping them in the refrigerator.

Finally, I carefully plopped mounds of the strawberry cream cheese buttercream icing evenly around the top of that layer of pureed strawberries, gently smoothed it out to the edges – made possible because the half-frozen cake and the cold berries made the icing immediately begin to set up rather than melting down into the berries – and TA DA! I ended up with a perfectly beautiful, extra special, super-moist fresh strawberry cake! And, as previously mentioned, it was devoured almost immediately, with folks going back for seconds.

This truly is an amazing cake, and oh, the creamy, smooth strawberry frosting on top! Add in the pureed strawberry layer, and seriously – If you love strawberries and easy cakes, this is the recipe you want!

Did I share my saga of “fixing up” that “special” cake at the picnic? In all the confusion, I think I may have forgotten to mention that little detail. But now you know, and you know how to fix it if something similar ever happens to you. Frankly, it was such a hit, I may adapt this method intentionally – well, at least the freezing and adding pureed strawberries part – from now on. But if you run into anyone from my family, let’s just keep this to ourselves, ok? Enjoy!

**STRAWBERRY SHORT/SHEET CAKE**

**NOTE: DO NOT** use the instructions or ingredients listed on cake mix box. Only use the white cake mix according to the instructions in this recipe!

Prep Time10 minutes Cook Time 30 minutes Total Time 40 minutes

**Ingredients**

* 16 oz (or more) strawberries rinsed and with tops cut off
* 1 box white cake mix
* 3 eggs
* 3/4 cup oil
* 3 oz strawberry Jell-o

**Strawberry Frosting**

* 1/4 cup [butter](https://amzn.to/3cPKLoj), softened
* 4 oz cream cheese, softened
* 1 tsp [vanilla](https://amzn.to/33mCDsp)
* 3 cups powdered sugar
* 1/4 cup strawberry puree
* 1 Cup additional strawberry puree for middle layer

1. Preheat oven to 350.

Begin by adding your strawberries to a blender or food process and blending. You will need 1 cup of pureed strawberries for the cake batter, plus an additional ¼ cup of pureed strawberries for the frosting.

1. Mix cake mix, eggs, and oil in a large bowl until well combined. Add JELL-O and 1 cup strawberry puree. Mix well.
2. Pour into a greased 9x13 pan.
3. Bake for 30 minutes.
4. Let cake cool.
5. While cake is cooling, make frosting by creaming together the butter and cream cheese. Add vanilla, powdered sugar and strawberry puree. Frost cake. ENJOY!

CUPCAKE VERSION: Divide batter into about 24 cupcake tins and bake at 350°F for 15 to 20 minutes. Watch carefully as bake times vary from oven to oven. Cool and frost.

NOTES: Store leftover cake covered, in fridge for 3-4 days. May also flash freeze leftovers – uncovered – just until solid and then wrap frozen pieces with plastic wrap and then foil. Will keep in freezer for 2-3 months. Simply unwrap, thaw, and serve.

May be made with plain (not sugared) frozen strawberries instead of fresh. Just partially thaw before pureeing. Also, can be made with 1 ½ C pureed raspberries and raspberry gelatin.

Frosting may be made in advance and stored in a container in the fridge one day before frosting. Just be sure to give it a good mix before using on cake or cupcakes.