

Rowan's Honey Cakes

(the third-batch recipe)

I have been making these since 1527, which sounds like a boast but is mostly an apology. A recipe carried that long stops being instructions and becomes a set of habits with flour on them. I will do my best to write the habits down.

You should know before you begin that the first batch often burns. This is not a failure of the recipe. It is usually a sign that you stopped to help someone carry water, or read a letter, or listen to a person who needed listening to. The recipe forgives this. So should you.

What you will need

Enough for eight cakes. Which is to say, enough for five, because you will give some away. You will. I have watched people try not to.

- 2 cups flour. Any honest flour.
- ½ cup honey. From bees you trust, if you can arrange it. The bees work hard and deserve the mention.
- ½ cup butter, softened. Not melted. Melted butter is butter that was rushed, and the cakes can tell.
- 2 eggs.
- 1 teaspoon ground ginger — sharp enough to be noticed. Kindness is not the same as blandness. People forget this about both cakes and me.
- ½ teaspoon baking soda. There was no baking soda in 1527. We used beaten eggs and hope. Use the soda.
- A pinch of salt.
- A little milk, if the batter seems stubborn.

What you will do

1. Warm your oven to 350°, and forgive it if it lies to you a little. Ovens have been lying to me for five hundred years. Bread ovens, hearth stones, a woodstove in a very bad winter, and now a machine with a number on the front. The number helps. It does not tell the whole truth. Nothing with a door ever does.

1. Beat the butter and honey together until they stop being two things. Take your time. This is the part of the recipe where most of the tenderness happens, and it cannot be added later.
1. Add the eggs, one at a time, and then the ginger and salt. The batter will look briefly like a mistake. It is not a mistake. Very few things are, this early.
1. Add the flour and the soda a little at a time, with milk if it fights you. Stop when it is soft and thick and drops slowly from the spoon, as if it would rather stay.
1. Spoon them onto a lined tray, smaller than you think — they spread, the way news does in a small village.
1. Bake for 12 to 15 minutes, until the edges are golden and the centers are still warm-hearted. You want them a little tender in the middle. Most good things are.
1. Eat one yourself, standing up, while they are too hot and the honey is still loud. This is the baker's portion and it is not negotiable. I have outlived every argument against it.
1. Give the rest away. If a little one drops hers in the mud, it does not count against her total. Small children drop things. That is what the extra batch is for.

A last note, from long practice: if someone in your house can catch falling food out of the air and looks far too pleased about it, hide the tray until the cakes have cooled. I will not say how I know this. He knows how I know this.

Be kind. Bake often. The two are more related than most cookbooks admit.

— R.W.

Elden Hollow, and everywhere since

A bonus recipe from *The Gentle Shadow* by Archetypal Architect