

Cowboy Cake, War Cake, Depression Cake

When America expanded west of the Mississippi River with the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, "make-do" cakes that could be baked on the move suited challenging times. One such cake was this Cowboy Cake, similar to a boiled raisin cake baked during the Civil War and World War I. It was made by simmering raisins in water, adding shortening, baking soda, sugar, spices, and flour and baking the batter in a Dutch oven. The big plus was that pioneers traveling west or prospectors hoping to strike it rich in the 1849 Gold Rush didn't need to add eggs, butter, or milk to this cake. This crowd-pleasing recipe comes from Luann Sewell Waters, of Wynnewood, OK, who teaches Dutch oven cooking and has researched the old recipes of the West. She says few chickens survived the west-bound trip, and eggs were hardier than the chickens. So pioneers invented ways to preserve eggs, such as dipping the eggs in paraffin, storing them in a brine, or sealing them with a borax and water solution that stuck to the shell.

Makes: 8 to 10 servings

Prep: 40 to 45 minutes

Bake: 25 to 30 minutes

1 cup raisins, dried peaches or apricots, or prunes

3 cups water

1 tablespoon vegetable shortening

1 teaspoon baking soda

1 cup granulated sugar

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg

Pinch of salt

2 cups all-purpose flour

Topping:

Reserved raisin cooking water

1 cup granulated sugar

1 tablespoon vegetable shortening

1. Place the raisins and water in a 10-inch Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Let the water come to a simmer, then reduce the heat and let the raisins simmer uncovered until they turn a

caramel-brown color and soften, 15 to 20 minutes. Drain the raisins and set aside, and reserve all the juice. Measure out 1 cup of the reserved juice and place this in the Dutch oven.

2. Place a rack in the center of the oven, and preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. To the 1 cup warm juice, add the shortening and stir to melt. Let this cool. Stir in the soda, sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg, salt, and flour until smooth. Stir in the reserved raisins. Set this aside.

3. For the topping, place the remaining juice in a medium pan with sugar and shortening over medium-high heat. Bring to a boil, stirring, until the mixture thickens and is syrupy, about 10 to 15 minutes. If you have a candy thermometer bring it 220 degrees. Stir well and pour carefully onto the top of the cake batter. Cover the Dutch oven, and place the pan in the oven.

4. Bake the cake for 25 to 30 minutes, or until the cake springs back when lightly pressed in the center. Serve warm with ice cream.