THE CURLY CHEF

GOURMET EGGLESS · ALCOHOL-FREE CHRISTMAS PLUM CAKE

Yield: 1 round cake (20 cm / 8-inch) Approx. finished weight: 1.5–1.7 kg
Oven: 150°C conventional / 140°C fan Bake: approximately 90–115 minutes

A deeply aromatic, fruit-rich Christmas cake with citrus-spice-soaked dried fruits, toasted nuts, dark caramel and a moist, close-textured crumb. It contains no eggs and no alcohol.

1. Ingredients

A. Dried fruit

Ingredient	Quantity
Black raisins	150 g
Golden raisins	100 g
Currants	100 g
Dates, pitted and chopped	100 g
Dried figs, chopped	60 g
Dried apricots, chopped	80 g
Dried cranberries	60 g
Candied orange peel, finely diced	40 g
Candied lemon peel, finely diced	20 g
Glacé cherries, quartered	50 g
Apple juice	180 ml
Fresh orange juice	100 ml
Fresh lemon juice	15 ml
Finely grated orange zest	5 g
Finely grated lemon zest	2 g

B. Citrus-spice infusion

Ingredient	Quantity
Cinnamon stick	1
Green cardamom pods, lightly crushed	4
Whole cloves	4
Star anise	1
Ground nutmeg	½ tsp
Ground dried ginger	½ tsp
Vanilla extract	½ tsp

C. Dark caramel

Ingredient	Quantity
Caster sugar	100 g
Hot water	100 ml

D. Cake batter

Ingredient	Quantity
Unsalted butter, softened	180 g
Dark brown sugar	150 g
Thick Greek yoghurt, room temperature	150 g
Plain flour	260 g
Almond flour	50 g
Milk powder	20 g
Baking powder	5 g
Bicarbonate of soda	2 g
Fine sea salt	3 g
Ground cinnamon	2 g
Ground nutmeg	0.5 g
Ground ginger	0.5 g
Ground cardamom	0.5 g
Vanilla extract	5 g
Prepared dark caramel	80 g
Milk, as needed	40–60 ml

E. Nuts and finishing

Ingredient	Quantity
Almonds, toasted and chopped	60 g
Walnuts, toasted and chopped	50 g
Pecans, toasted and chopped	30 g
Apricot jam/glaze	30 g
Toasted pistachios	20 g
Candied orange peel	As needed
Whole pecans for decoration (optional)	As needed

2. Equipment and preparation

Equipment: 20 cm / 8-inch round cake tin, baking parchment, large mixing bowl, small saucepan, sieve, balloon whisk or hand mixer, silicone spatula, weighing scale, fine grater, pastry brush and thin skewer.

Before starting: Bring butter and yoghurt to cool room temperature. Toast the nuts at 150°C for 8–10 minutes until fragrant, then cool completely. Chop the larger fruits into small, even pieces. Keep the fruit pieces reasonably uniform so the cake slices cleanly.

Prepare the tin: Grease the tin lightly. Line the base and sides with baking parchment, and make a tall parchment collar extending about 5 cm above the rim. This helps protect the cake during its long, gentle bake.

3. Method

Step 1 — Make the citrus-spice infusion

Combine the apple juice, orange juice and lemon juice in a saucepan. Add the cinnamon stick, crushed cardamom pods, cloves, star anise, nutmeg, ginger, orange zest and lemon zest. Bring just to a gentle simmer and simmer for 5–7 minutes. Remove from the heat, cover and infuse for 10 minutes. Strain through a fine sieve, pressing lightly on the spices. Stir in the ½ teaspoon vanilla extract.

Step 2 — Macerate the fruit (24–48 hours)

Place all prepared dried fruits, candied peel and glacé cherries in a non-reactive bowl. Pour the warm strained infusion over the fruit and fold thoroughly. Cover and refrigerate for 24–48 hours, stirring once or twice. The fruit should become plump and glossy and absorb most of the liquid. Before mixing the cake, drain away any substantial pool of free liquid; do not squeeze the fruit dry. Bring the fruit towards room temperature before use.

Step 3 — Prepare the dark caramel

Place the caster sugar in a clean, dry, heavy-based saucepan and heat over medium heat. Allow it to melt, swirling the pan gently as needed; avoid stirring aggressively. Cook to a deep amber colour. Remove the pan from the heat. Very carefully add the hot water in small additions, standing back as it bubbles and releases steam. Return to low heat and stir until any hardened caramel dissolves into a smooth syrup. Cool completely. Weigh out 80 g for the cake; reserve any remainder separately.

Safety: Melted sugar causes severe burns. Use a deep saucepan, add water cautiously and never taste hot caramel.

Step 4 — Cream butter and sugar

Beat the softened butter and dark brown sugar for about 3–4 minutes, scraping the bowl once or twice, until noticeably lighter, creamy and evenly combined. A hand mixer on medium speed is convenient; a sturdy whisk can also be used. Do not melt the butter.

Step 5 — Incorporate yoghurt, vanilla and caramel

Add the room-temperature Greek yoghurt in three additions, mixing gently after each until incorporated. Scrape the bowl. Add 5 g vanilla extract, followed by the 80 g cooled caramel. Mix only until the batter is uniform. If the mixture looks slightly split, proceed with the dry ingredients; avoid prolonged beating.

Step 6 — Combine the dry ingredients

In a separate bowl, whisk together the plain flour, almond flour, milk powder, baking powder, bicarbonate of soda, salt, cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger and cardamom. Sift if the almond flour is fine enough to pass through the sieve; otherwise whisk thoroughly to distribute the raising agents and spices evenly.

Step 7 — Make the batter

Add the dry mixture to the butter-yoghurt mixture in two additions. Fold with a silicone spatula until only a few dry streaks remain. Add milk gradually, starting with 40 ml and using up to 60 ml only if needed. The finished batter should be thick, soft and spoonable — not runny. Do not overmix; excessive mixing can make the cake tough.

Step 8 — Add fruit and nuts

If the macerated fruit has excess surface moisture, drain it well. Toss the fruit with about 1 tablespoon taken from the measured flour quantity, if available, to help separate sticky pieces. Fold the fruit into the batter in two or three additions. Fold in the cooled toasted almonds, walnuts and pecans. Stop as soon as the fruit and nuts are evenly distributed.

Step 9 — Fill the tin

Transfer the batter to the prepared tin. Spread it evenly into the corners and level the top with a spatula. Tap the tin gently once or twice to remove large trapped air pockets. Arrange a few whole pecans or pieces of candied orange peel on top if desired. Do not stir or mix the batter once it is in the tin.

Step 10 — Bake slowly

Bake on the lower-middle rack at 150°C conventional heat (or 140°C fan) for approximately 90–115 minutes. Avoid opening the oven during the first 70 minutes. If the top becomes too dark before the centre is baked, loosely tent with foil. Begin checking at 90 minutes: insert a thin skewer into the centre, avoiding a large piece of fruit. It should emerge without wet cake batter; a few moist crumbs are acceptable. If wet batter remains, continue baking in 5–10-minute intervals.

Step 11 — Cool and unmould

Leave the cake in its tin for 25–30 minutes. Run a thin knife around the edge if necessary, then lift out and remove the parchment. Cool completely on a wire rack before glazing. Do not glaze a warm cake, as the glaze may become runny and soak unevenly.

Step 12 — Glaze and decorate

Warm the apricot jam or glaze gently until fluid; strain if it contains fruit pieces. Brush a thin, even coat over the completely cooled cake. Finish with toasted pistachios and fine strips of candied orange peel. Keep the finish delicate so the cake remains the focus.

Step 13 — Rest before serving

Once the glaze has set, wrap the cake in baking parchment and then foil. Rest for 24–48 hours in a cool place before slicing. This allows the spice, citrus and caramel flavours to settle and the crumb to become more cohesive. Use a sharp serrated knife and wipe the blade between slices for clean cuts.

4. Critical success points

• **Fruit moisture:** The fruit should be plump, not swimming in liquid. Excess free liquid can make the centre gummy and prolong baking.

• **Caramel colour:** Aim for deep amber, not black. Burnt caramel will make the cake bitter.

• **Ingredient temperature:** Room-temperature yoghurt and softened butter help the batter combine more evenly.

• **Milk quantity:** Add gradually. The batter should remain thick and hold its shape when spooned.

• **Gentle folding:** Once flour is added, mix only until combined. Fold fruit and nuts in carefully.

• **Low, slow baking:** The tall parchment collar and moderate oven temperature protect the fruit-rich cake during its long bake.

• **Cooling:** Cool completely before glazing and wrapping. Trapped steam can soften the crust and encourage spoilage.

5. Storage and serving

Because this cake contains no alcohol, it does not have the preservative effect associated with traditional spirit-soaked fruit cakes. Once completely cool and glazed, wrap it well. Store in an airtight container in a cool place for about 4–5 days, or refrigerate for up to 2 weeks. For longer storage, wrap tightly and freeze for up to 2 months. Thaw while still wrapped, then bring to room temperature before serving. Discard if there is any sign of mould, fermentation or an off smell.

Serve at room temperature in modest slices. For a polished dessert plate, pair with lightly whipped vanilla cream or a small spoonful of warm vanilla custard; these are optional accompaniments, not part of the cake recipe.

6. Troubleshooting

Issue	Likely cause and correction
Dense or heavy crumb	Butter may have been too cold, batter overmixed, or too much fruit liquid retained. Cream properly, fold gently and drain excess liquid.
Gummy centre	Cake may be underbaked or fruit mixture too wet. Check the centre with a skewer and bake in short intervals until no wet batter remains.
Top browns too quickly	Oven may run hot or tin may be too high. Tent loosely with foil and keep the cake on the lower-middle rack.
Fruit sinks	Fruit may be excessively wet or pieces too large. Drain well, chop evenly and fold through thick batter.
Cake crumbles when sliced	It may be cut while warm or before resting. Cool fully and rest wrapped for 24–48 hours before slicing.

Recipe note: Oven performance, tin material, fruit moisture and the exact size of chopped fruit affect baking time. Treat the stated time as a range and use the skewer test as the final indicator. This formulation is designed to be completely eggless and alcohol-free.