

Southern Origins

The stories behind the Southern foods we savor most

WORDS BY JENNIFER STEWART KORNEGAY//ILLUSTRATION BY JING LI

LANE CAKE

VOL. II: Chapter Six



What do the holidays, the 19th Amendment and “To Kill a Mockingbird” have in common? The answer’s a piece of cake. No, it’s not just really simple. It’s a literal piece of cake, a piece of Lane Cake, to be precise.

When it was created in the late 1890s in Clayton, Alabama, Lane Cake, with its layers of rich, custardy, whisky-soaked filling, became an instant sensation. Through 100-plus years since, it’s fallen out of favor, most likely due to the time required to make it, but it gained renewed attention when it was designated Alabama’s official state cake in 2016. Today, as more people rediscover this complex (and boozy) confection, the Lane Cake has reclaimed a spot on the “storied Southern desserts” pedestal and has reached this lofty status for several reasons.

First, thanks to the afore-mentioned time and labor it demands, Lane Cake has spent most of its life relegated to special occasions. Many recall their grandmothers and mothers only attempting it for anniversaries or around the holidays.

Being tied to these warm memories of family celebrations is its foundational first layer.

Then, it’s called by name in perhaps the most significant book to ever come out of Alabama and certainly one of the most important works of Southern writing, “To Kill a Mockingbird.” In the story, a Lane Cake is made to welcome a visiting relative, and young Scout recounts, “Miss Maudie Atkinson baked a Lane cake so loaded with shinny, it made me tight.” This meaningful mention gives the cake additional height.

Finally, as folklorist and author Emily Blejwas uncovered when working on her book “The Story of Alabama in Fourteen Foods,” there’s a thin but discernible flour trail leading from Lane Cake to women’s suffrage. Here, Blejwas sifts through the cake’s history and explains how it’s a sweet ingredient that when blended and baked with several others, led to women’s increased independence, the true icing on the cake.

When and where did Lane Cake originate?

It was first published in an 1898 cookbook called “Some Good Things to Eat,” published by Emma Rylander Lane, who lived in Clayton, Alabama. She entered the cake in a baking contest in Columbus, Georgia, and it won first place. She originally called it Prize Cake, but a friend convinced her to put her name on it.

At that time, baking soda had just been invented, which made it easier to make light, airy layer cakes, but since they no longer used yeast, these baking soda cakes also lost some of the richness of the old-style cakes. To compensate, cakes being created in the South in the late 1800s had very rich fillings, like the Lane Cake filling.

Lane Cake

Emma Rylander Lane

BATTER FOR CAKE

8 egg whites
1 cup butter
1 cup sweet milk
2 cups sifted sugar
3¼ cups sifted flour
2 teaspoons baking powder
1 tablespoon vanilla

Sift the flour and baking powder together three times, cream the butter and sugar until perfectly light, add to it alternately, little at a time, milk and flour, until all are used, beginning and ending with flour. Last, beat in the well whipped whites and vanilla. Bake in four layers, using medium sized pie tins, with one layer of ungreased brown paper in the bottom of each tin.

FILLING

8 egg yolks
1 large cup sugar
½ cup butter
1 cup raisins, seeded and finely clipped
1 wine-glass good whiskey or brandy
1 teaspoon vanilla

Filling—Beat well together eight egg yolks, one large cup of sugar, and half a cup of butter. Pour into a small, deep stew pan and cook on top of the stove until quite thick, stirring all the time, or it will be sure to burn. When done and while still hot, put in one cup of seeded and finely clipped raisins, one wine-glass of good whiskey or brandy and one teaspoon of vanilla.

Spread thickly between the layers, and ice with standard white icing. It is much better to be made a day or two before using.

My prize cake, and named not from my own conceit, but through the courtesy of Mrs. Janie McDowell Pruett of Eufaula, Ala.

Lane Cake also has whiskey in it; it’s actually pretty packed with it, so it was called Ha Ha cake by some. And some ladies would substitute grape juice for whiskey if they were making it for a child’s birthday party or something.

What makes Lane Cake such an iconic Southern, specifically Alabama, food?

There are so many ways a food gets put in that place of prominence. Taste is one, and this cake is delicious. But my conjecture is that its “Alabama icon” status is due to its mention in “To Kill a Mockingbird.” It may be the most important book ever come out of Alabama — and it’s such a key piece of Southern culture — so that put it over the top. Also, the heritage of Lane Cake is easily traceable, so we know it is truly an Alabama cake and a Southern cake. And it’s somewhat rare for a cake to have such a specific state tie. All over the South you have pound cake and peach cobbler, but Lane Cake has such a strong Alabama identity.

What surprised you about Lane Cake’s history?

I was so intrigued by its role in the wider cookbook movement, which played a part in women’s suffrage. Around the time Emma created her cake and then self-published her cookbook, there was a huge cookbook movement happening all over America. All these women were putting out cookbooks to help each other run healthy and economical households. They were writ-

ten so that they were direct and easy to follow. They were written by white and black women. The first cookbook written by a former enslaved woman came in this wave of women-written cookbooks.

These books played kinda conflicting roles in women’s advancement. They were built on women’s desires to aid each other in what was seen as purely “women’s’ work.” But they fostered a connection that then led to the women’s club movement, where so many women joined and got involved in and organized around important issues of the day. And the confidence and camaraderie they found in these clubs and in the work they were doing through them eventually led more and more everyday women to join suffrage movement leaders and demand the right to vote. So, in a way, you can draw line from writing cookbooks to the club movement to the vote, and Emma Lane was a part of that. I think that’s pretty cool. It’s also cool that 2020 is the 100th anniversary of the 19th amendment and women gaining the vote. Plus, it’s an election year.

Is the Lane Cake still being made much today?

I don’t think so. Not really. Many talk about their mothers or grandmothers making it, and I’ve had people tell me they’d made it one time to try it. But it does not seem widespread. It is a time commitment; I think you’d have to be really into baking. But I hate to see it go. People are interested in the story, so I hope a new generation will go beyond just knowing about it and revive it in the kitchen too. GG