

CROSSING THE ATLANTIC BY COOKBOOK

Cookbooks, particularly baking books, that cross the Atlantic have the well-earned reputation of being troublemakers. Differences in flour have long been suspected of being the culprit. When MacMillan of London bought the rights to publish my book *The Cake Bible* in the U.K., I was determined to get to the bottom of this culinary Tower of Babel. A British friend began sending me kilograms of the two basic flours available to British consumers: self-raising and plain, and I started baking. Much to my alarm, the cakes produced with the British flour were unrecognizable from their original models. It was hard to believe that innocent seeming flour could be responsible for such a dramatic difference. The logical way to conquer the problem seemed clear: to retest and redevelop the recipes to work as well as the originals, but with British ingredients. The only place to do this was in the UK with native equipment and native ingredients.

Kyle Cathie, my brilliant British editor with pioneering spirit, made it possible for me to spend two weeks in a charming airy flat retesting recipes. She purchased a heavy duty mixer, food processor, 12 dozen eggs and arranged a shopping tour to Sainsbury, a large British supermarket. I was delighted to discover that England is a baker's paradise: double cream with pure uncooked flavor, wondrous clotted cream which is divine simply spread on cake in place of buttercream, glorious golden refiners syrup, flavorful marzipan and nuts of every type and gradation imaginable. The problem was indeed the flour. Bleached cake flour is indispensable for butter cakes. But the only bleached flour available was the "self-raising" variety which contained leavening. When a cake uses an acid ingredient such as sour cream, it needs to be tempered with baking soda. But when the flour already contains the maximum amount of baking powder, adding baking soda would make the combined leavening too high, causing the cake to collapse. Fortunately, the plain unbleached flour is just fine for all the sponge type of cakes.

The solution was first to assess how much baking powder was contained in the cake flour and then to create a blend of self-raising and plain flour in order to lower the overall leavening but still have the benefit of the cake flour. This necessitated other changes as well, such as replacing all yolk cakes with whole eggs and decreasing butter to strengthen the cakes' structure. With sour cream cakes, extra sugar was needed for aeration. Each and every cake had to be adjusted separately, sometimes as many as three times before it was exactly right. It was a night and day job, without much sleep, but well worth the effort because I can now be confident that when a British person is baking one of my cakes, it will have essentially the same flavor and texture as mine.