

Gunpowder, Semtex and oats

In the first of a new series, food writer Andrew Webb tells the story behind British favourites. First up is that spicy, gingery cake, parkin

ILLUSTRATION **KERRY LEMON**

PARKIN. THE MERE WORD SOUNDS AS COMFORTING as a hot toddy on a November night. It's a fitting name for a cake that's fiery and sweet, the thing to reach for when the nights draw in and winter announces its arrival. Centuries ago, the Vikings celebrated this time of year with hot cakes made from oats and honey, the likely ancestors of the deeply spicy, gingery, sticky cake we now know as parkin. The less pagan Victorians kept the cake, if not the sentiment, and made parkin for Bonfire Night. It's an apt association – a good parkin should have the snap of gunpowder about it in taste, and be as squidgy as Semtex.

WHAT'S IN IT?

The chief ingredient is still oats, which grow well in the cool north of Britain. Nearly all the other ingredients are products of the Victorian era, coming from an empire far greater than the Vikings could ever have imagined.

Raw cane sugar from the West Indies was refined in London and the byproducts made into treacle and golden syrup, which add sweetness, stickiness and, in the case of treacle, a dark, rich colour. The cake's warming, faintly exotic quality comes from a key ingredient, ginger. It and other spices that are sometimes added to parkin (such as nutmeg, cinnamon and mace) are products of the ancient spice-route trade.

FIERCELY GUARDED RECIPES

Like a cakey War of the Roses, Yorkshire and Lancashire offer variations on the parkin theme. In Yorkshire it often features lard and coarsely ground oats, whereas Lancashire parkin

uses finer-milled oats, resulting in a closer texture. The cake was so admired in the Victorian era, the first Sunday of November was known as Parkin Sunday in Yorkshire's West Riding. Mary Milnes Gaskell's *A Yorkshire Cookery Book*, from 1917, gives recipes for no fewer than 17 versions.

In the past, each family matriarch would have her own parkin recipe, and Stephen Taylor's gran was no exception. He and partner Sally Hinchliffe have been making parkin since they opened the Bondgate Bakery in Otley, Yorkshire, in 1984. "Stephen's gran came from Wakefield and the recipe's been handed down through the years," says Sally. In her eyes, the key to success is dark muscovado sugar, which gives an almost nutty flavour. This, along with a bit of black treacle – "you don't want it too bitter" – and golden syrup, ensures the sticky consistency that lifts parkin from a mere ginger-flavoured cake into something special. "In a parkin you get that extra depth of flavour," says Sally.

JUST ADD MILK...

In her 1950 book *Traditional Recipes of the British Isles*, Nell Heaton advises serving parkin with a glass of warm milk to children on Bonfire Night. Better still is the creation of pudding chef Matt Strutt, at The Pigs pub near Holt, Norfolk, who serves a doorstep-size slab of warm parkin with a refreshing ginger beer ice-cream float.

Parkin improves if you leave it in a tin for a few days. It mellows and grows sticky, after which it's ready to set your Bonfire Night off with a bang. **£** *Andrew Webb's book Food Britannia will be published in May 2011 by Random House.*

Want to make parkin? Visit bit.ly/parkinrecipe for our definitive version

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