

Coconut Layer Cake

A cake is a cake, but a fluffy white coconut layer cake is an occasion, especially at the holidays. This is a beautiful cake that glistens with mounds of fluffy coconut. It resembles an edible snow globe, and it's much easier to make than it looks. The baker can choose to use sweetened flaked coconut or moist fresh coconut, depending on their sweet tooth and family traditions. Personally, I prefer fresh coconut because it reminds me of the cake my grandmother made for Christmas each year, but I opt for the convenience of frozen grated fresh coconut instead of tackling a whole coconut, which requires tools, skills, and courage. No matter the choice of coconut, the key ingredient for this cake is patience after it's assembled. It needs to sit in the fridge for at least a couple of days. The anticipation adds to the deliciousness.

Makes 12 to 16 servings

Cake Layers

Cooking spray or shortening, for the pan
2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour, plus more for the pan
2 teaspoons baking powder
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 cup whole milk, at room temperature
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/2 teaspoon almond extract
1/2 teaspoon coconut extract
1 cup (8 ounces) butter, at room temperature
1 3/4 cups sugar
4 large eggs, at room temperature

Coconut Syrup

1/4 cup coconut milk
2 tablespoons sugar

Coconut and Cream Cheese Buttercream

8 ounces cream cheese, at room temperature
1 cup butter, at room temperature
1 cup well-stirred coconut cream
2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
1/2 teaspoon coconut extract
3 to 4 cups powdered sugar, sifted, or as needed
3 cups freshly grated or thawed unsweetened coconut OR sweetened flaked coconut, or as needed (see note below)

1. For the cake layers: Preheat the oven to 350°F. Grease (with shortening) two 9-inch cake pans with straight sides and dust with flour, tapping out the excess.

2. In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, and salt in a medium-size bowl.
3. Combine the milk, vanilla extract, almond extract, and coconut extract in a measuring cup.
4. In a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment or with a hand-held mixer, beat the butter on medium speed until smooth and creamy.
5. With the mixer running, gradually add the sugar. Increase the speed to high and beat until the mixture is light and fluffy, about 3 minutes. Scrape down the sides of the bowl.
6. Add the eggs, one at a time, beating well on medium speed after each addition.
7. Beat in the flour mixture in three additions, alternating with half of the milk. Beat on low speed only until the batter is smooth after each addition.
8. Pour the batter into the pans and bake until a wooden pick inserted in the center comes out clean, about 30 minutes. The tops of the cakes should be golden brown, spring back when tapped, and starting to pull away from the sides of the pan. Cool the cakes in the pans on a wire rack for 10 minutes, and then turn out onto the wire rack to cool completely.
9. For the syrup: Stir together the coconut milk and sugar in a small saucepan over low heat until the sugar dissolves. Brush over the cooled cake layers. The goal is to moisten the layers, not them soggy. You might not need it all.
10. For the buttercream: Beat the cream cheese, butter, coconut cream, vanilla extract, and coconut extract in a large bowl with an electric mixer on medium speed until smooth. With the mixer running, gradually add the powdered sugar and beat until smooth, scraping down the sides of the bowl often. Beat in 3 cups of powdered sugar on low speed. Beat in more powdered sugar, if needed, in 1/4 cup increments until the frosting is sticky, creamy, and just thick enough to spread over the cake without dripping. The moist frosting is what holds the coconut in place and keeps the cake layers tender while the assembled cake sits in the refrigerator.
11. To assemble the cake: Place one of the cooled cake layers on a serving plate or cake stand. Cover the top with frosting and sprinkle generously with coconut.
12. Add the second cake layer. Cover the top and sides of the cake with frosting. (You might not need it all.) Cover the cake with coconut, pressing firmly to help it adhere.
13. Cover the cake loosely with plastic wrap or nonstick foil, or place in a covered cake carrier. Refrigerate at least 24 hours, and up to 4 days, before serving.

Note: Freshly grated or thawed shredded fresh coconut is unsweetened and quite moist. It's the flavor and texture that many people recall fondly when cooks made their annual Christmas cake with a real coconut. Sweetened flake coconut will make the cake considerably sweeter, dryer, and fluffier.