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MELISSA CLARK | A Good Appetite MAY 6, 2009

Happy Birthday to Me, With a Spanish Lilt

"THE problem with dinner at your house," my friend Robin laments, "is that if you make something I really like, I know I'll never get to eat it again because you never make anything twice."

This is true, at least when it comes to home cooking. When I try to recreate, say, a yummy braised lamb I once made, I don't have the will to see it through. A pinch of this, a little of that, a forgotten ingredient here substituted by another one there always makes each dish its own new thing, for better or worse. (When I create a recipe for publication, however, I always make it the same way at least twice.)

The exception to my never-again rule is my birthday brunch, consisting of bagels, lox and all the trimmings. They need no tinkering from the likes of me.

But not so my birthday cake. Home-baked in myriad manifestations, it's an ever-morphing free-for-all, changing with the years, my mood, the ingredients lying around the house.

I've done ethereal angel food, dense devil's food, nut-filled tortes, crumbly vanilla. I've frosted with everything from chewy fudge to billowing meringue, generously slathering the layers with the likes of rose petal jam and Key lime curd.

This year, my birthday was making me feel less exuberant and whimsical and more, um, mature and restrained. I wanted an elegant, sophisticated cake, something delicate yet flavorful, slightly different without being radical.

I decided on using an almond sour cream cake, adapted from "The Cake Bible" by Rose Levy Beranbaum, as the base. I've made this recipe before, but always end up varying some tiny aspect of it — swapping crème fraîche and yogurt for the sour cream, or other nuts for the almonds, and always substituting more vanilla extract for the almond extract, which I do not like.

This time, I used unblanched ground almonds left over from my Christmas

cookie extravaganza. The skins added a speckled brown color to the cake crumb and a slightly deeper flavor. I also grated in some lemon zest to give the cake a brighter, more springlike flavor.

The combination of lemon and almonds reminded me of the moist almond confection called *tarta de Santiago* I savored on a long-ago trip to Galicia in Spain. Made with beaten eggs and almonds, it's flavored with plenty of lemon zest and a dash of cinnamon.

I loved the idea of spicing the cake with cinnamon. But it was too late; the layers were already baked.

The frosting, though, was still a work in progress. I had chosen a not too sweet, egg-white-lightened butter cream from Nick Malgieri's book "How to Bake." Whisking in some cinnamon and a touch more lemon would give my cake a subtle Galician air.

As the mixer whirled, the citrus and spice fragrance mingled with the scent of cooling cake. It did remind me of Spain and made me crave salty jamón. Sadly there was nary a pork product in the fridge.

But I did uncover a bottle of fino sherry, and poured a little nip as jamón consolation. I also splashed some into the frosting to give it a boozy, nutty, caramelized taste.

The finished frosted cake had the nuanced flavor of the *tarta de Santiago* but the luxurious buttery texture of a cake-mix cake (without the chemical tang). So I wrote down the recipe. This one's a keeper, just as it is.

Recipe: Almond Birthday Cake with Sherry-Lemon Butter Cream Time: 1 hour 15 minutes plus cooling

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FOR THE CAKE:

1 cup plus 2 tablespoons (2 sticks plus 2 tablespoons) unsalted butter, at room temperature, more for greasing pans

3 large eggs



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1 cup sour cream
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/2 teaspoon finely grated lemon zest
2 1/2 cups cake flour
1/2 cup finely ground almonds
1 1/2 cups sugar
3/4 teaspoon baking powder
3/4 teaspoon baking soda
3/4 teaspoon salt

FOR THE BUTTER CREAM:

4 large egg whites
1 cup sugar
large pinch salt
3/4 pound unsalted butter (3 sticks), at room temperature

3 tablespoons fino (dry) sherry
1/2 teaspoon finely grated lemon zest
1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon.

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease two 8-inch round cake pans and line bottoms with parchment or waxed paper. In a bowl, beat together the eggs, 1/4 cup sour cream, vanilla and lemon zest.

2. In bowl of an electric mixer, whisk together the cake flour, ground

almonds, sugar, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Beat in butter and remaining 3/4 cup sour cream until light and fluffy, 1 to 2 minutes. Slowly beat in the egg mixture until fully combined.

3. Scrape batter into prepared pans. Bake for 30 to 35 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in center of a cake layer comes out clean. Let cake layers cool in pans on wire racks for 15 minutes, then invert onto racks and peel off paper. Let cool completely on racks.

4. While cakes cool, make frosting: In a heatproof bowl suspended over a pan of simmering water (or use a double boiler), whisk egg whites, sugar and salt until sugar is completely melted (130 to 140 degrees on a candy thermometer), 3 to 4 minutes. Remove egg whites from heat; beat mixture with an electric mixer on medium-high speed until completely cooled and thickened, 5 to 7 minutes.

5. Beat in the butter, a little at a time, until frosting is smooth and fluffy. Beat in the sherry, lemon zest and cinnamon.

6. To frost cake, place 1 layer on a cake plate, rounded side down, trimming if necessary so it lies flat (save this part for snacking). Spread with a third of the frosting, top with second layer and frost remainder of cake.

Yield: 8 servings. ■