



Source: AFP, 'US attacks Mubarak rival's jailing', *The Australian online*, 26/12/05.

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It takes four days to prepare and cook my Christmas cake and then I allow a further three days to ice and decorate. Twenty-eight years ago I first sampled this cake. My sister handed me the recipe and I've been making it ever since. It was passed on to her, by the cook of a nursing home at her place of work. The copy is almost illegible now, creased and faded. I liked the cake then and now because it has a gorgeous, rich colour, dense and square, saturated with fruit and nuts.

It seems to me to be a most excellent cake although it only got the runner-up spot the one time I entered it in the Shepparton show. The consistency is regular and firm, reliable, yet one can detect on the tongue a sort of mellowness that is directly influenced by its texture. All the women and men in my family agree that texture is the most important feature of a fruitcake. It is never dry in the way that some cakes are turned over and over in one's mouth.

Of course, over time, I have modified the recipe to suit my particular view of the ideal. Candied peel had to go and the moment that one ingredient is taken away the whole structure of the cake is changed. This year I added two tablespoons of a friend's home-made marmalade, including the grated rind of two lemons and one orange to the mixture, a balance of sweetness and tartness to replace the loss of the candied rind.

Individual packs of sultanas, currants, dates, raisins and cherries are gathered. The fruit is weighed (there having been many refinements to quantities over the years) and then macerated in brandy or liqueur for 24 hours. Every year 250 grams (more or less) of almonds are blanched, skins removed and the milky, white nut is incorporated into the mixture. It is the perfect fruit and nut ratio. I add an extra egg some times as it is hard to be accurate when measuring farm eggs, however I understand that the

balance of butter, sugar and eggs are the integral ingredients that underpin the complexity of any cake.

The tin is carefully wrapped with brown paper on the outside and reserved butter paper on the inside. The cake is cooked slowly over three and a half hours with the temperature adjusted over this period. Attention to the oven is paramount, too high a temperature, too low a temperature, paper surround on tin, position in oven, fan forced or not all have a direct relationship to the outcome. Then the ethereal, invisible signs radiate from the oven, drift and float in the summer heat, envelop and play with us.

There was a weakness of colour this year, a little disappointing, but I put that down to the inclusion of golden syrup rather than treacle, marmalade rather than black jam.

A board is prepared and covered with a paper of a suitably, subtle hue, which then acts as a foil and pedestal to support the glory of what was and what is now. Almond icing is carefully laid over, allowed to harden, then white sugar icing rolled and smoothed on top.

Some years ago, I prepared royal icing that was piped in cornelli ribbons over the crystalline whiteness. Last Christmas the cake was bound and incised with assorted metallic thread. This year I wrapped organza ribbon around the base and decorated it with sugar stars and cachous.

Today, now, I look at it: the ribbon has come off and a good third of it has disappeared. Each coming day, possibly into the new year, there will be less and less until there is no more.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Lyn Patone.*