

A Fresh Look At Nebraska



-Isms

By LuAnn Schindler

Former Northeast Nebraskan Johnny Carson teased, "The worst gift is a fruitcake. There is only one fruitcake in the entire world and people keep sending it to each other."

Carson may have been delivering his satirical monologue, but I'm betting he never tasted Grandma's Fruitcake, a Nebraska-made product featured this month on the Food Network.

Nebraska's claim to fruitcake fame began in 1917 when the Lantz brothers of St. Louis brainstormed ways to keep bakers busy during the summer. When they stumbled upon their grandmother's recipe for fruit and nut cake, the men whipped up an idea to mass produce fruitcakes.

In 1950, the brothers decided that Beatrice's Wilke Baking Company would continue making the fruitcakes. The Lantz brothers traveled to Beatrice to oversee the transfer of their operation from St. Louis to the new Nebraska location. Metz Baking Company, Earthgrains and Sara Lee owned the business at various times until 2001. Then, a local group of investors purchased the company and renamed it the Beatrice Baking Company.

The business reports it shipped over 1.2 million pounds of fruitcake across the U.S. in 2007. Even the crew of the USS Nebraska, stationed in Washington, receives individually wrapped slices of the cake.

Want to know another interesting bit of trivia about Grandma's Fruitcake? The bakery is the largest consumer of alcohol in the state. Bourbon, rum and brandy are added to the mixture. Amaretto is included in the chocolate cake recipe.

This history of fruitcake shows how the dessert has evolved from its days of Middle East and Mediterranean influences.

Romans combined pomegranate seeds and pine nuts with barley and molded it into a ring. Roman soldiers carried the nourishing cakes to battle sites because they stayed fresh for long periods.

The Egyptians lined coffins with the heavy cake. They believed fruitcake would survive through the afterlife and offer a taste of sweet heaven to the resurrected.

The Europeans added fruit, honey and spices to the mix. At one point in the 1700s, European countries banned the cakes because they were considered a sinfully rich decadence.

And you can thank the uptight Victorians for adding the kick to the cake. They believed liquor added heft to the baked good.

When someone mentions fruitcake, visions of a heavy cake stuffed with citron and green and red candied cherries pops into my mind. I remember my mom making one – or maybe more – when I was in elementary school. She gave one to family friends and the one she made for our house sat in the refrigerator until the following Thanksgiving. I could never understand how the petrified piece of rock – I mean, cake – remained unscathed from any type of mold. (Whiskey, I'm guessing.)

I taste-tested several types of Grandma's Fruitcake, for research, of course. Happily, I can report that it doesn't resemble the dreaded holiday goodie you may envision.

As you prepare for the upcoming holiday season, don't be afraid to share the delicious treat.

Fruitcake deserves some holiday love.

That's no joke.