

Excerpted from *MIDWEST MADE: Big, Bold Baking from the Heartland* by Shauna Sever. Copyright © 2019. Available from Running Press, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

## Cleveland-Style Cassata Cake

*Serves 10 to 12*

One of my favorite midwestern food memories is the birthday cake I requested for many years when visiting my father, known to me as “that strawberry and vanilla pudding cake”—a yellow sponge sheet in two layers, filled with fresh juicy berries and thick vanilla pastry cream, swathed in whipped cream frosting. As it turns out, that cake has a real name, and was actually just a more conveniently shaped version of the towering, round Cleveland-style cassata cake, a classic of the city’s Little Italy neighborhood.

Cleveland cassata derives from the centuries-old *cassata siciliana*—essentially a cannoli in cake form, with a ricotta cheese filling, jewel-like candied fruit, and lavishly decorated. The LaPuma family, which emigrated from Sicily to Cleveland in the late 1800s, is credited with creating the first “Cleveland-style” cassata in the 1920s at their family bakery. Turns out the LaPuma kids didn’t like the ricotta filling of the original (isn’t that always the way?) and so came the remix, using locally available ingredients. LaPuma Bakery still cranks out the same “modern” cassatas today, as do many other Cleveland-area bakeries, such as Corbo’s and Presti’s, and other old-school bakeries throughout the Midwest.

My version of a cassata is flavor-boosted with a nod to its roots: extra-virgin olive oil, a hit of lemon, and a subtle splash of balsamic vinegar to make the rubied berries even more vibrant.

### **BERRIES:**

1 pound/453 g fresh strawberries, hulled and chopped into **1/2-inch/1.25 cm** pieces  
1 tablespoon/25 g granulated sugar  
1 teaspoon balsamic vinegar

### **CAKE:**

Nonstick cooking spray for pans 2 cups/120 g cake flour, sifted  
**11/2 cups/300 g** granulated sugar, divided  
**21/2** teaspoons baking powder  
**1/2** teaspoon fine sea salt  
**3/4** cup/170 g ice-cold water  
**1/2** cup/113 g extra-virgin olive oil  
1 tablespoon finely grated lemon zest  
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract  
7 large eggs, separated, at room temperature  
1 teaspoon freshly squeezed lemon juice

### **ASSEMBLY:**

2 cups Spoonable Vanilla Custard (recipe at bottom)  
2 batches Make-Ahead Whipped Cream (recipe at bottom)

Prepare the berries: In a medium bowl, toss the strawberries with the sugar and balsamic vinegar. Let rest for at least 1 hour, or up to 1 day ahead in the refrigerator, tightly covered.

Prepare the cake: Position a rack to the center of the oven and preheat it to 325°F/170°C. Grease three 8-inch/20 cm round cake pans with nonstick cooking spray and line them with parchment paper.

In a large bowl, whisk together the cake flour, 1 cup/200 g of the sugar, and the baking powder and salt.

In a medium bowl, whisk together the cold water, oil, lemon zest, vanilla, and egg yolks until smooth. Pour into the flour mixture and whisk vigorously until smooth, about 1 minute.

In the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, combine the egg whites and lemon juice. Whisk on medium-high speed until soft peaks form, about 2 minutes. Gradually add the remaining 1/2 cup/100 g sugar. Beat until the whites are firmer and opaque, but still soft in shape, about 1 minute more (overbeaten whites will cause the cake to collapse). Fold about a third of the whipped whites into the batter until smooth, then fold in the remaining whites. Divide the batter equally among the prepared pans.

Bake until golden, a toothpick inserted into the center of a layer comes out clean, *and* the top springs back when lightly pressed, 40 to 45 minutes (a toothpick will be clean a few minutes before the top springs back). Let cool completely in the pans on a wire rack—the cakes may shrink slightly as they cool.

Assemble the cake: Drain the strawberries well, catching the juice in a medium bowl.

When the cake layers have cooled, peel away the parchment paper. Place 1 layer on a cake stand and tuck strips of parchment under the cake to protect the cake stand from drips. Use a pastry brush to moisten the top of the layer with a few tablespoons of strawberry juice (you won't use all the drained juice). Top with half of the berries. Spoon half of the custard over the berries. Repeat the process with the second cake layer, berries, and custard. Top with the final cake layer. Frost the cake with the whipped cream, finishing with lots of swoops and swirls. Chill for at least 3 hours. This cake is best served the day it's assembled. Leftovers keep for up to 2 days, tightly covered and refrigerated.

*TIP >This party cake is a make-ahead wonder: The custard, fruit, and whipped cream frosting can be made a day ahead, and the cake layers 2 days ahead, kept tightly wrapped (separately) and refrigerated.*

## Spoonable Vanilla Custard

*Makes about 3 cups/710 ml custard*

One of my favorite things to make and eat, vanilla pastry cream is definitely a back-pocket recipe. Use this formula as a donut, pie, or cake filling that's sturdy, but luscious. Envelop it with Danish pastry, or dab some on top of individual pastries before baking. Additionally, if you eliminate the whole egg and reduce the cornstarch to 2 tablespoons, you'll have the dreamiest vanilla pudding on the planet, or you can freeze it in ice pop molds to revisit the very best frozen novelty of the 1980s.

2 cups/453 g whole milk\*

4 large egg yolks

1 large egg

1/2 cup/100 g granulated sugar

3 tablespoons/24 g cornstarch

1/4 teaspoon fine sea salt  
2 tablespoons/28 g unsalted butter, at room temperature  
1 teaspoon vanilla bean paste or pure vanilla extract

*\*You can up the richness here by swapping out the whole milk for half-and-half, but whatever you do, don't use low-fat milk. It just comes out tasting . . . beige. Bleh.*

In a 3-quart/2.8 L saucepan over medium heat, bring the milk to a bare simmer, but don't let it boil. Meanwhile, in a large bowl, whisk together the egg yolks, egg, sugar, cornstarch, and salt until paler in color, about 1 minute. Slowly whisk in the hot milk until well blended. Pour the mixture back into the saucepan. Set the pan over medium heat and whisk often until the custard is very thick and just beginning to bubble, about 5 minutes. Remove the pan from the heat.

Pour the custard into a blender. Add the butter and vanilla paste or extract and blend on high speed for 1 minute. Pour into a medium bowl. Cover the surface with plastic wrap and refrigerate until cold and firm, at least 3 hours, or up to 2 days ahead. Whisk well before using.

## Make-Ahead Whipped Cream

*Makes about 4 cups/945 ml whipped cream, to equal an 8-ounce/225 g container of whipped topping*

When I told people I was writing a book about midwestern baking, I immediately had to follow it up by saying that it wasn't going to be a book full of Cool Whip and Jell-O. Even though those two things make up a fair amount of my own dessert memories, I believe there's a tastier way to get a whipped cream topping that's easily transportable, stable enough to last through a potluck, and made days ahead of when you actually need it, so you're not whipping cream like a crazy person in front of your guests. It's a savior during holidays when you already have one million other things to do.

3 tablespoons/42 g cold water  
3/4 teaspoon pure vanilla extract  
1 1/2 teaspoons unflavored gelatin  
2 cups/480 g heavy whipping cream  
6 tablespoons/45 g confectioners' sugar  
1/4 teaspoon cream of tartar

In a small, microwave-safe bowl, whisk together the cold water, vanilla, and gelatin until smooth. Let soften for 5 minutes. Microwave on **high** until melted, about 10 seconds.

Pour the cream into a medium bowl or the bowl of an electric mixer. Whisking constantly, add the melted gelatin mixture until blended. Add the confectioners' sugar and cream of tartar and whisk to blend. With handheld beaters or a stand mixer on medium-high speed, whip the cream to smooth, stable peaks, but still soft in appearance (think: shaving cream right out of the can). Do not overwhip—if in doubt, use an electric mixer just until the cream holds its shape, and then finish beating by hand with a whisk. Use immediately, or transfer to an airtight container to refrigerate for up to 3 days. If storing, remove from the refrigerator and whisk energetically to smooth and fluff the cream before using.

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## Nebraskan Runzas

*Makes 12 sandwiches*

*Runzas (a.k.a. Bierocks or Krautburgers, among other names) are a pocket sandwich, a puffy, yeasted dough baked around a savory meat filling. They likely originated in Russia in the 1800s, and came to the Midwest with the Volga Germans, a population of German people who lived along the Volga River in southeastern Russia in the 18th century and settled in Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas in the early 20th century.*

In Nebraska, you'll find runzas with a longer, rectangular shape; whereas in Kansas, they tend to be shaped more like circular buns. Either way, they're traditionally filled with a simple combination of onions, ground beef, and cabbage, and that's perfectly delicious. But one day while shopping for the cabbage, my eyes fell on a packet of "superfood" slaw mixture of green and red cabbage, shredded broccoli stems, kale, carrots, Brussels sprouts, and more. Trying to ignore the shouts of Midwesterners past with this admittedly hippie twist on the classic, I decided upon tasting that I loved the pop of texture and color this new combination of vegetables gave the sandwiches, as well as the reduced prep time, and now it's what I use all the time.

### **DOUGH:**

2 1/4 teaspoons instant yeast  
3 tablespoons/42 g warm water (110° to 115°F/43° to 46°C)  
5 cups/640 g unbleached bread flour, spooned and leveled, plus more for dusting  
6 tablespoons/75 g granulated sugar  
1 teaspoon fine sea salt  
1 1/2 cups/337 g warm whole milk (110° to 115°F/43° to 46°C)  
1/2 cup/1 stick/113 g unsalted butter, melted  
2 large eggs, at room temperature  
Oil for bowl

### **FILLING:**

2 tablespoons/28 g vegetable oil  
1 medium-size onion, finely diced (about 2 cups/320 g)  
2 garlic cloves, minced  
1 pound/450 g ground beef (85% lean)  
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce  
4 cups/400 g shredded cabbage or cruciferous combination of your choice (see headnote)  
Fine sea salt and freshly ground black pepper  
1 1/2 cups/170 g coarsely grated extra-sharp Cheddar cheese  
2 tablespoons/28 g unsalted butter, melted, for serving

Position racks to the upper and lower thirds of the oven, and preheat it to 350°F/180°C. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper.

Prepare the dough: In a small cup, whisk together the yeast and warm water.

In the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the dough hook, combine the flour, sugar, and salt.

In a medium bowl, whisk together the warm milk, melted butter, eggs, and dissolved yeast mixture. Whisk until smooth. Pour into the flour mixture and stir with a wooden spoon to form a shaggy dough. Set the mixer to medium speed and knead until the dough is smooth and elastic, 5 to 6 minutes. Place the dough in an oiled bowl, cover tightly, and let rise in a warm place for 30 minutes. Punch the dough down, cover, and let rise for another 30 minutes.

Meanwhile, prepare the filling: In a large skillet over medium-high heat, heat the oil. Add the onion and garlic and sauté until soft and just beginning to turn golden, about 5 minutes. Add the ground beef and cook until browned, 5 minutes more. Add the Worcestershire sauce and cabbage and cook until tender, about 8 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Remove the pan from the heat and allow the filling to cool. Once cooled, stir in the cheese.

Assemble the sandwiches: Turn out the dough onto a lightly floured work surface, and divide into 12 equal portions. Roll each portion into a ball, then use a rolling pin to form the dough balls into rough 6-inch/15 cm circles (if the dough fights you as you're trying to roll it out, let it rest for 5 minutes and start again). Place a generous 1/3 cup/about 100 g of filling in the center of each circle. Fold half of the dough over the filling, and pinch the edges to seal, rolling them up slightly all around the edge. Place the runzas, seam-side down, on the prepared baking sheets.

Bake until golden, 20 to 25 minutes. Let cool on the sheets for 10 minutes. Brush lightly with the melted butter just before serving. Any leftovers reheat well the next day.