Food and Drink, Ingredients, Posts, Students, Tools and Techniques, Women and Gender

New-Fashioned Recipe: Angel Food Cake and Nineteenth-Century Technological Innovation

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When I was growing up, my mother would bake Angel Food Cake as a special summertime dessert. I remember the anticipation of seeing the freshly baked cake in its distinctive pan, precariously balanced upside down on an old bottle on the kitchen counter. Served with fresh raspberries and my great-grandmother’s lemon pudding frosting, there was something delightfully old-fashioned and elegant about Angel Food Cake. But in the late-nineteenth century, Angel Food Cake represented the latest in culinary innovation.

My previous two posts for the Recipes Project examined how changing technology and ingredients influenced women’s recipe collecting. Those transformations fostered the development of new recipes, like Angel Food Cake.

Angel Food Cake or Angel Cake is a sponge cake developed in the United States, likely in the 1860s and 1870s. The recipe first appeared in print in the 1880s and was included in both Lincoln and Farmer’s editions of The Boston Cooking School Cookbook. Angel Food Cake was an elegant means of using up surplus egg whites. Beaten egg whites gave the cake “a texture so airy that the confection
supposedly has the sublimity of angels.”[1] With its name, Angel Food Cake joined a long tradition of bestowing celestial or religious names on baked goods and sweetmeats. Angel Food Cake remained a classic and popular dessert throughout the twentieth century—Eleanor Roosevelt, for example, served it at the White House—but its popularity was truly cemented by the introduction of a reliable prepackaged baking mix in the 1940s.

The introduction of Angel Food Cake and its opposite, Devil’s Food Cake, followed earlier trends of highlighting the contrasting appearance of cakes for dramatic effect on the dessert table. At mid-century, Lady Cake (a delicate white cake made with egg whites and flavored with bitter almonds or peach kernels) and Gold Cake (a deep yellow cake made with egg yolks and flavored with citrus) were popular pairings for dessert tables where the contrast in their coloring was on display. Caroline B. King in her cake-based memoirs remembered her sister’s Angel Food Cake as “snowy white and airy” and her sister’s explanation that her new recipe for Devil’s Food Cake would look “lovely in a cake basket with Angel Cake; first a slice of the chocolate, then one of the white.”[2]

This advertisement for household items from The Boston Cooking School Cookbook hints at the remarkable variety of mass-produced goods available in the late nineteenth century. These new-fashioned recipes also revealed the technological advancements of the last century. While Angel Food Cake relied
mainly on whipped egg whites as a leavening agent, like early sponge cakes, this cake owed its existence to technological advancements of the nineteenth century.

Women eagerly embraced laborsaving devices in the kitchen, the popularity of the eggbeater is no surprise considering that early nineteenth century cake recipes require hours of beating. Many would have agreed with Marion Harland’s assertion in Common Sense in the Household (1872) that “a good egg-beater [was] a treasure.”[3] For Angel Food Cake, eggbeaters eased the labor of whipping egg whites to stiff peaks and the addition of cream of tartar stabilized the whipped whites and prevented darkening.

The cake’s airy texture is achieved not only through the whipped egg whites, but also through the availability of commercially ground flour. The softer, refined wheat flour available at the end of the nineteenth century contributed to the cake’s light texture and cloudlike appearance; flour manufacturing techniques could produce a lighter colored flour. The cake’s white appearance was also dependent upon the availability of pure white granulated sugar, which was available thanks to advancements in the refining process and saved women the labor of grinding loaf sugar.

The mass production of cooking implements after the Civil War provided the Angel Food Cake Pan, necessary for producing such a tall cake. The batter could slowly climb up the cake pan during the cooking process. It’s no coincidence that recipes for Angel Food Cake became popular once the pan necessary for its shape and texture was being mass produced.

And so by the end of the nineteenth century, the combined forces of technological innovation and improved ingredients resulted in a remarkable variety of cakes that were easier to produce at home, including Angel Food Cake. While the ease of prepackaged cake mixes was still several decades away, cake baking remained a difficult and time-consuming task—but significantly less so than even twenty-five years previously.

The increased accessibility of cake baking, both in terms of affordability and labor, resulted in the creation of elaborate new recipes. During this period, baker ingenuity resulted in an explosion of new confections such as White Mountain Cake, Devil’s Food, Moonshine Cake, Chocolate Marshmallow Cake, Boston Cream Pie, Mocha Cake, and, of course, Angel Food Cake. Thus, women not only collected cake recipes for the practical reason that technology and ingredients had changed, but also because they were so many new and exciting options for cake baking.


Did you know Angel Food cake has been served for over 100 years? Your favorite characters on the popular television show Downton Abbey probably would have enjoyed this iconic dessert recipe. Our Old-Fashioned Angel Food Cake recipe is as quick and easy. Wow your family and friends with decadent cake recipes from this FREE eCookbook. You can have your cake and eat it too with these homemade cake recipes!

**Angel food cake**

1 ¼ CUPS (115 g) cake flour, sifted.

¼ teaspoon salt.

Sift together the cake flour and salt, then set aside; see below how to make your own cake flour.

Place the egg whites into the bowl and beat on low speed until foamy, about 30 seconds. Add cream of tartar; continue low speed beat until soft peaks form, about 1 minute.