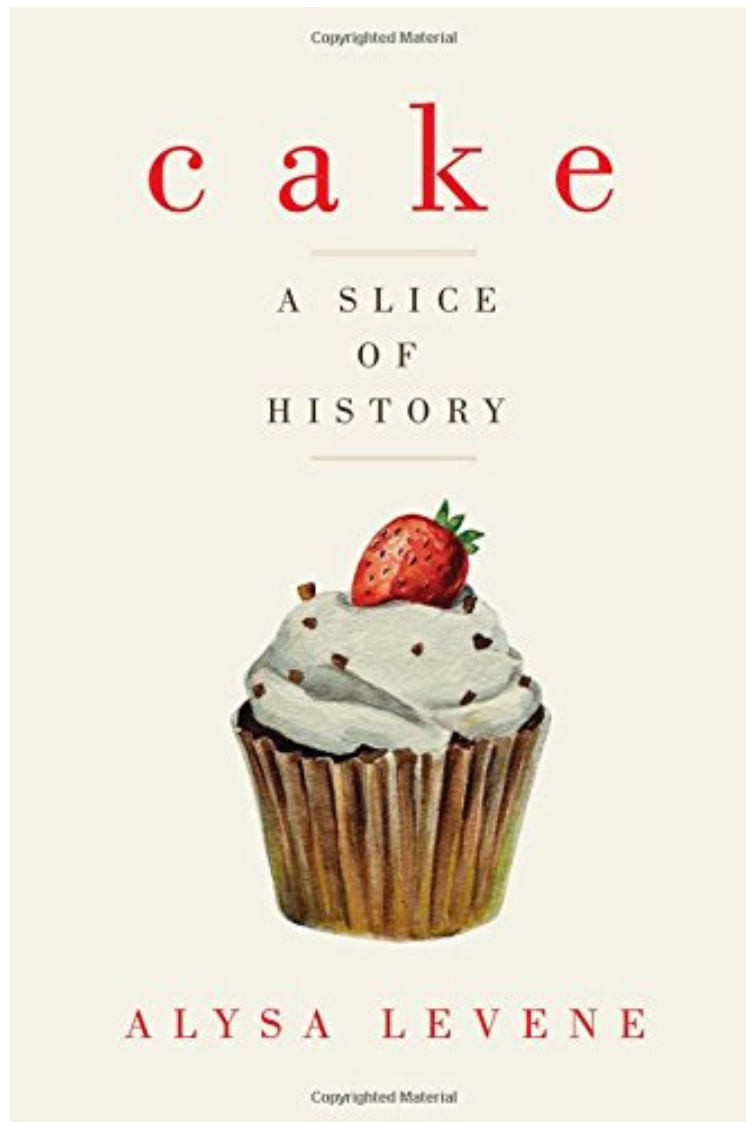


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## Cake: A Slice of History

*Alysa Levene*

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**Alysa Levene : Cake: A Slice of History** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Cake: A Slice of History:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Very Interesting and Fun to ReadBy CharlesIrsquo;ve always liked food historymdash;maybe because as a small child I spent quite a lot of time reading ldquo;The Cooking of Viennarsquo;s Empire,rdquo; a Time-Life cookbook my mother had, and from it learned quite a bit of history. Many, if not most, modern cookbooks contain large sections of history, and many food history books contain a lot of recipes,

such as Anne Mendelson's "Milk." So there is significant overlap between the two genres. This book, "Cake," by Alysa Levene falls more into the history category and less into the cookbook category. It offers a largely successful blend of well-written data dump and mild social commentary—satisfying, like a cake! Naturally enough, the book is subtitled "A Slice of History." That history is, for the most part, that of the Anglo-Saxon world of cake. To the extent other countries and cultures show up, it is mostly because their cakes were imported into, or influenced, the Anglo-Saxon world. Levene begins, in fact, with Alfred the Great, than whom it is harder to get more Anglo-Saxon. As the legend goes, King Alfred, on the run from the Vikings, took anonymous refuge in a woman's house. She asked him to watch the cakes baking over the fire; he, daydreaming of victory over his enemies, let them burn, whereupon the woman scolded him. Levene's point is that cakes have a long history, and also that what Alfred burned wasn't really what we think of when we say "cake." It was more like bread, had no raising agent, and wasn't sweet, much less frosted. And the instruments of baking were, of course, primitive and hard to control. The history of cake is the history of how our food got from there to here. Levene goes through all we know about early baking, back to Classical times. Such baking could be quite fancy and was highly varied, even within particular cultures. As with much else, technology and variety, driven largely by ingredient availability, was lacking in early Western Europe, which had lost those earlier cakes, along with machinery and roads. The renewal of cake began with fruit cakes, which became popular across Europe in the Middle Ages, as international trade increased and specialty ingredients, from sugar to exotic fruits and spices, became widely available. Here, as throughout the book, Levene alternates history with examples of the cakes resulting from that history, from gingerbread to a still-made-today Easter cake called "Simnel cake," a fruit cake "covered with marzipan, with a second marzipan layer in the middle, and decorated on the top with eleven marzipan balls representing the Apostles (minus Judas)." Marzipan is my favorite sweet, and you can buy quality versions on in bulk nowadays. I know what I'm doing this weekend! Anyway, much of this history is cultural history, rather than kings-and-battles history (King Alfred is the rare king mentioned), and Levene does an excellent job of tying specific cakes and history together. The book then turns to more modern times, when colonialism and slavery made sugar cheap, and foods like pound cake, angel cake, and other refined, risen cakes started coming to the fore. At first, leavening was provided by eggs and hours of elbow grease; then by chemical agents. At the same time, starting in the Eighteenth Century, cookbooks began to be written and become popular. Levene alternates among descriptions of cakes popular through time, some still popular today, the technical methods used to make those cakes, and how those methods changed over time. This may not be everybody's cup of tea, but I find it fascinating, in large part because my focus in cooking tends to the technical, which is an important element of successful baking, more so than some other forms of cooking. If you don't like either history or baking, though, this book probably isn't for you. Throughout, but not with an overly heavy hand, Levene weaves the theme of how baking is mostly something done by women (except for professionals in France, who are nearly all men), and tries to analyze whether this is good, bad or indifferent. To her credit, she doesn't have a simplistic "woman in kitchen bad" approach; rather, she (channeling Nigella Lawson) notes that a woman can be, by her own choice and to her own advantage, a "domestic goddess," and there is nothing inherently demeaning about women baking or, for that matter, sex roles in general, even if dictated by culture more than biology. She notes "the much overlooked fact that women are attached to homemaking and housekeeping even in an era when these things are not fashionable or expected of liberated and career-capable women"—by the choice of those women. In many ways, after all, baking and cookbooks were methods throughout history by which women were able to flaunt their abilities, and they are obviously methods of nurturing, which biologically is tied more to women than men (not that Levene mentions this last, obvious and indisputable yet not politically correct, point). Almost all famous cookbooks in history were written by women, and women like Julia Child are indissolubly identified with modern cuisine, so to suggest that necessarily "baking = drudgery for women" is pretty obviously wrong. Levene covers the 20th Century as well—the wars, the shortages and resulting use of ersatz ingredients, the 1950s, the changing cultural role and symbolism of birthday cakes, and, finally, the recent cupcake craze, which has largely, but not completely, burnt out. This last she uses to return to the theme of women's relationship to cake, noting that women dominate the trade and the home production of cupcakes, which she ascribes to cultural reasons, and also notes that cupcakes are a frippery of the affluent. But that doesn't mean they, and cakes in general, are not popular for good reason. In these days of political bitterness, every one of us can get behind a good slice of cake, and then line up for seconds. It's time for me to work on my Simnel cake!

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Informative and Entertaining  
By R. Coffman  
I got the ebook and really enjoyed it. Lots of great information packed into an entertaining read. If you like history, if you like baking, if you ever thought about how progress in other areas directly affect what we eat and how we eat it, if you're just a geek like me and was sitting there eating a cupcake wondering how we wound up with them as a dessert, then you'll probably find the book enjoyable. Is it a perfect book? no. Will it change your life? Possibly. I had no idea how interesting specific food histories are, and now I'm a little obsessed. I got one on bread and I've got one on my wish list about butter. So be warned, this book could open up a whole new dimension of geekery for you.

Cake can evoke thoughts of home, comfort someone at a time of grief or celebrate a birth or new love. It is a maker of memories, a marker of identities, and delicious! It was the year 878 A.D., and a man claims sanctuary in a small village home in Wessex. To the surprise of the villager, the man is not a passing vagabond but Alfred, King of the Anglo-Saxons. The village homemaker is happy to hide him from the marauding Danes, provided he keeps an eye on the cake she has baking in the oven. Preoccupied with how to re-take his kingdom, Alfred lets the cakes burn, and the incident passed in to folklore forever. From these seemingly ignoble beginnings, not only was Alfred able to reclaim his spot in history, but the humble villagers' cake has ascended in world culture as well. Alysa Levene looks at cakes both ancient and modern, from the Fruit Cake, to the Pound Cake, from the ubiquitous birthday cake to the Angel Food Cake, all the way up to competitive baking shows on television and our modern obsession with macarons and cup cakes. Along the way, author Alysa Levene shows how cakes are so much more than just a delicious sugar hit, and reflects on how and why cakes became the food to eat in times of celebration. Cake reflects cultural differences, whether it is the changing role of women in the home, the expansion of global trade, even advances in technology. Entertaining and delightfully informative, *Cake: A Slice of History* promises to be a witty and joyous celebration of our cultural heritage. BW illustrations throughout

“An illuminating, informative, and engagingly entertaining book that will delight readers of cookery titles and social history. This is a natural complement to Nicola Humble’s *Cake: A Global History*.” - Library Journal  
“Levene tells a good story. This may be your only chance to have your Cake and read it, too.” - La Crosse Tribune  
About the Author: Alysa Levene is a social historian at Oxford Brookes University and an enthusiastic amateur baker. Visit her website at [www.sliceofcakeandapocketofpins.wordpress.com](http://www.sliceofcakeandapocketofpins.wordpress.com).