

To a Friend Met at a Potluck

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You have asked for my banana bread recipe, and it is attached below, but first I would like to give you some context as to its origins. It is my favorite recipe and I frequently am complimented on it, as you have done, but must confess that it is ultimately not my own. Its unrevised form comes from a Chicago newspaper in the late 1990s, and its current iteration is the work of my mother. To understand the weight of this, I suppose I must expand on the promised context.

My mother is a grand maple tree in autumn, warm arms wide with stained leaves. She is freer than any bird I've ever seen, evolving as smoothly as a sunset dims from orange to red. She is an alpine landscape, an immediate summer scene with snowy peaks far ahead. She is the smell of a balmy evening and a swift breeze. She is the taste of banana bread, crust a little too thick and too brown, but better that way—My mother would make this bread for us, her three children, at random and frequent intervals throughout each fall.

We would return home from school, one by one, and discover the sweet, rounded fragrance of roasted bananas. She baked it from scratch in the same dish always: a ceramic bread pan, glazed red. At the bottom, imprinted on the belly of the dish was “Le Creuset,” a French brand idolized by my mother. Throughout our childhoods, every time she used that pan she would lament of the one item missing from her life, the gift she's wanted since college but never received: a heart shaped Le Creuset Dutch oven.

In English, le Creuset translates to “the crucible,” perhaps a dramatic term for a brand making luxury cookware. The crucible, the dish, the oven. Whatever pan you bought, my mother would have used it well, she bakes near constantly. Award winning sweet-rolls, ancestral kolaczki, secret gingerbread, and a hundred other recipes written by others and born by her. She bakes for therapy, for the trials life has given her, undeserving.

When I was in middle school, my older brother was admitted into an inpatient mental hospital for problems still murky. I remember the first time we worked up to visiting him, my mother planned to bake a treat. She flipped through her recipes trying to find some muffin or tart that would heal. She settled on her lemon poppy seed cake—a universal favorite. She chose it because my brother liked it, but I suspect there was another reason. My mother does not act without thinking, and the silences in which she thinks feel loud and oppressive, like pressure on your ears. Her answers

have weight. I suspect she chose her lemon poppy seed cake not because of the batter, but the pan: a strong cast-iron Bundt. She purchased that pan slowly, saving up twenties she stashed away each time Dad pissed her off until the \$150 mold was hers. An elitist about many consumer goods, my mother has purchased most of her small kitchen appliances in this same manner—in lieu of anger. For the occasion, that pan, the Bundt, was perfect. It made perfect cakes. It made a lovely visit. At the hospital, all five of us—the whole family whole once more—sat around a lunchroom table discussing Mom's cake in great detail for an hour because it seemed the only acceptable object of conversation. At the end of the visit, we had to throw out our leftovers since the dull plastic knife we were offered to slice it with butchered the sweet to crumbs.

My mother is economical. She takes up as little space as possible, which is sad to see. She moves out of the way for others, and bends easily to demands. It's not worth a fight, she says. She lives in her house like it is not her own, disposing of and consolidating her belongings until everything she owns is densely packed with purpose. My mother has many recipes, but only one cookbook. It is handmade, within a cloth-bound journal I suspect she made herself, though I've never asked. Each recipe is a clipping from a newspaper, ripped from a yellowed magazine, copied from a library book, or scrawled out from the internet. She knows how to use our printer, but refuses to for recipes only. No recipe enters her book unaltered, either: annotated in black pen, the ingredients have been tweaked, times changed. She places additional small loopy notes at the head of each text, dating the first time she tried that recipe and shorthand value judgments. She is a filter; all things which pass through her emerge better.

She loves to provide unstoppably. In my sophomore year of high school, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Us three kids were pulled aside by my father and informed that things would change. She had cancer. She likely wouldn't die. We'd have to do more dishes. Two quick weeks after her initial diagnosis and on her 45th birthday, she had a double mastectomy. I wanted to reflect the love she has constantly shown me, and begged my Dad to let us bring a cake to the hospital. Chocolate stout in the strong Bundt. Mom couldn't eat proper food for a week, so we brought a saltine with a candle mounted in butter instead. She couldn't even eat the whole cracker. My mother returned home shortly—the surgery had gone well and, to the best of my current knowledge, the anomaly

has been fully removed. Still, we were all shocked when, two weeks after coming home, we found her shuffling around the kitchen at 6 AM making scones for breakfast.

I apologize for rambling. It may seem that I have gotten off track, but I have not. You must understand this woman to appreciate her bread. See, as you cut the first slice, you must forget the process you have just gone through to make it—that never happened. Instead, you just walked home from school and dropped your backpack on a brown leather couch in the living room. You smell the bread—oh, the smell! You find it on the counter with a note from Mom—loopy black cursive. You cut a thick warm slice, and as you take your first bite, you think of the strong ceramic pan and you think of her.

Banana Bread [9/'01- Marlena solid food. Good.]

1 cup sugar
 1/3 cup margarine or butter, softened
 2 eggs
 1 1/2 cups mashed ripe bananas [use only 3 bananas esp. if they're big]
 1/3 cup water
 1 2/3 cups all purpose flour*
 1 teaspoon baking soda
 1/2 teaspoon salt
 1/4 teaspoon baking powder
 1/2 cup chopped nuts [CUT!]

Heat oven to 350°. Grease bottom only of loaf pan, 8 1/2×4 1/2×2 1/2 or 9×5×3 inches. Mix sugar and margarine in 2 1/2-quart bowl. Stir in eggs until blended. Add bananas and water; beat 30 seconds. Stir in remaining ingredients except nuts just until moistened; stir in nuts. Pour into pan. Bake until wooden pick inserted in center comes out clean, 8-inch loaf 1 1/4 hours, 9-inch loaf 55 to 60 minutes; cool 5 minutes. Loosen sides of loaf from pan; remove from pan. Cool completely before slicing. 1 loaf(24 slices); 120 calories per slice.

*** Do not use self-rising flour in this recipe.**

Do-ahead Tip: Wrap and refrigerate no longer than 1 week.