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A perfect color combination for your Fourth of July celebration

By Susie Iventosch



Annette's Million Dollar Cake with Mascarpone Whipped Cream and Fresh Berries Photo Susie Iventosch

Cousin gatherings are so much fun in our family, because we are 18 first cousins in all. Once you add spouses and kids, and even grandkids, we can be a rather sizable group. This kind of gathering lends itself well to potlucks, where everyone can bring their favorite dish. And, when you have potlucks with large numbers of people, you come across some amazing recipes. This is exactly what happened in April, when I went back home to Michigan and my cousin Betsy quickly cobbled together a family dinner party. Her brother, Bruce, made jambalaya and a perfectly delightful kale salad with lemon vinaigrette and Parmesan cheese. It was all so fabulous. Then out came the dessert, which looked like any normal Bundt cake, but it was definitely anything but normal! My cousin John's wife, Annette Bartz, made this amazing cake, which she calls Million Dollar Cake. It is one of the best cakes I've tasted and you might be surprised by the ingredients, which include the usual butter, sugar, milk and eggs, in addition to chopped nuts, angel flake coconut and a box of crushed vanilla

wafers! The wafers take the place of flour, and they, along with the nuts and coconut, create a beautiful crusty edge, but with a very moist center.

When I asked Annette where she found the recipe, she told me she can't remember, but that she's been making it for almost 40 years. She usually serves it with whipped cream. I decided to use it for my July Fourth dessert this summer, because I love it with fresh fruit and the red and blue berries are so good with it. In place of plain whipped cream, I blended mascarpone cheese with a little sugar and folded whipped cream into that mixture. Also, the second time I made it, I completely forgot to purchase the vanilla wafers, but I happened to have four sleeves of Lotus Biscoff cookies on hand (you know those yummy cookies you get on various airlines). It turned out delicious as well, but with a slightly different taste. I've since found a couple of versions of this treasured recipe online, and one of them indicated the use of shortbread cookies in place of the vanilla wafers. So, I'd say you can totally experiment with different kinds of cookies, but they should be a dryer, crunchier cookie that can be pulverized into crumbs the consistency of graham cracker crumbs. My son suggested serving it with whipped cream and dark chocolate sauce. I hope to be making this cake for the next 40 years just like Annette, so there's plenty of time to try it with different toppings and different cookie crumbs! I'm so happy to have this recipe in my collection and thankful that Annette let me share it with all of you.

*Be sure to thoroughly grease or spray the Bundt pan and dust with flour in order to prevent the cake from sticking. I tried cooking spray dusted with flour the first time I made it and it came out of the pan beautifully. The next time, I coated the pan with Crisco and dusted with flour and I had to pry it out of the pan. Also, have a non-stick pan with a good finish to begin with seems to help, but still, make sure it's very-well greased before you pour the batter into the pan.

Annette's Million Dollar Cake

((Serves 14 or so))

INGREDIENTS

2 sticks of butter (1/2 pound) softened to room temperature
 2 cups granulated sugar
 6 large eggs
 1/4 cup milk
 1 (11-ounce) box of Vanilla Wafers, crushed (or about 2 1/2 cups)
 1 cup angel flake coconut
 1 cup chopped pecans or walnuts, or combination
 Garnishes: Mascarpone Whipped Cream (recipe below)
 Blueberries, Blackberries, Raspberries, Strawberries

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 F.

In a large mixing bowl, cream together butter and sugar with an electric mixer until fluffy. Add eggs, one at a time, and beat well after each addition. Mix in milk. Stir in the crushed Vanilla Wafers, coconut and nuts. Pour batter into the prepared Bundt pan and bake for 1 hour and 10 minutes, but check it for doneness at the 1 hour mark. Let cool for 10 minutes in the pan and then remove from pan by inverting it on a plate. You may need to loosen the cake a bit with a small knife in order to turn it out of the pan.

Mascarpone Whipped Cream

INGREDIENTS

1 cup heavy whipping cream
1/2 cup mascarpone cheese (4 ounces)
2 tablespoons powdered sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

DIRECTIONS

In a medium bowl, beat whipped cream until stiff peaks form. Set aside. In a second bowl, beat mascarpone cheese with vanilla and powdered sugar. Gently fold whipped cream into mascarpone mixture. Serve a spoonful on each slice of cake and garnish with berries.



Susie can be reached at suziventosch@gmail.com. This recipe can be found on our website: www.lamorindaweekly.com. If you would like to share your favorite recipe with Susie please contact her by email or call our office at (925) 377-0977.

Reach the reporter at: suziven@gmail.com

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