**The Muddiest Cake**

If nobody told you it was half root crops, you'd simply think it was a magnificent fudge bar, moist like a rainforest, rich like a truffle and creamy like cheesecake. It is what it is because of beets and carrots, not in spite of them. The fact that a single piece of this decadence contains two servings of vegetables and half a day's worth of fiber only compounds the satisfaction.

Though it tastes nothing of beet and carrot, their sweet and bitter flavors subtly enhance the impact of the cocoa powder, flanking its bitter tones with their own harmonies like background vocalists.  The beets and carrots give a starchy, sturdy thickness, along with sweetness. You can bake this cake with very little added sugar-or if you're truly hardcore, none at all.

Beets and carrots are both in season year-round, because they are always available either fresh or in the cooler. This means you can make this cake with local, fresh ingredients in any season. But this time of year, which happens to be my birthday season, is the high season for chocolate beet cake.

I came to this conclusion while tweaking the recipe ahead of my birthday, with beets and carrots from the farmer's market. In spring, many vendors have baby beets by the bunch for sale alongside big storage beets harvested last fall. The same goes with carrots: bunches of small new carrots with the tops still on, for sale next to big old carrots from last year.

I brought home young and old specimen from each species and ran side-by-side trials with zero added sugar. My impression was that new carrots and old beets make the best chocolate beet cake. The new carrots are more sweet and juicy, while the old carrots are drier and more "carroty." These differences are subtle, however, compared to the differences in new vs old beets. The small, new beets bunched with leaves attached have a more intense, earthy flavor that you can easily differentiate in a side-by-side. But part of the magic of beet cake is not remembering you're eating your veggies.

A pack of neighborhood kids, some mine, wandered into the house.  I offered them samples, and after the crumbs settled, they confirmed my conclusions. Their favorite was the one with new carrots and old beets. The cake with new beets, Louie complained, "had too much flavor."

With some added sugar, of course, and these children-of-the-corn-syrup would have devoured *any* permutation of root type and age in that cake. And with all of the sweetness the beets and carrots bring, it doesn't take much sugar at all. When Ana tasted a slightly sweetened version and said "it's almost sweet enough," I knew I'd nailed it.

The olive oil, mayonnaise and heavy cream that further enrich the cake, meanwhile, collaborate on a silkiness that makes you think of mousse, not hairy taproots pulled from the dirt.

A simple frosting of whipped cream and lemon zest rounds out the dish. The zest highlights bright vegetal notes from the roots, without fully exposing them. Apply cream and zest with abandon. The cake is half dirt, after all. There is nothing to feel guilty about.

**Chocolate Beet Bars**

Nobody will guess these bars have not only beets, but carrots. The amount of sugar you add is totally subjective. Taste the batter and decide-before adding the eggs, if you're squeamish.  It will probably taste sweeter than you expected, thanks to the beet and carrot, but perhaps you'll want it sweeter still.

*Makes a dense, one-inch deep bar in an 8 x 11-inch baking dish, or six 4-inch ramekins.*

2 cup (1/2 pound) old red beets, grated (not peeled, unless you really want to)

1 cups (1/4 pound) new carrots, grated (not peeled)

1 cup cocoa powder

1 cup heavy cream

1 cup flour

1 tsp baking soda

1 tsp vanilla

½ teaspoon salt

1 tablespoon mayonnaise

1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil

½ cup sugar

Optional: more sugar to taste, or ½ cup dark chocolate chips

2 eggs, beaten

Optional: a cup of cream, whipped, with 2 teaspoons of lemon zest on hand with which to garnish

Simmer the grated beets and carrots in 6 cups of water for 20 minutes, and strain. Put the purple liquid back in the pot and reduce it gently to about a cup. Blend the shredded beets and carrots with 2-4 tablespoons of the liquid, as necessary to allow a smooth vortex to form. Blend until glassy smooth. Add vanilla, cream, oil, mayo and egg, and blend again briefly until smooth.

Preheat oven to 350. Combine the dry ingredients (flour, cocoa, baking soda, salt, sugar) in a mixing bowl. Add the puree to the other ingredients, and mix. Taste, and add sugar if necessary, and up to a half cup of chocolate chips, as you see fit. Pour into a buttered 8 x 11-inch baking pan.

Bake for about an hour, or until a (clean) knife comes out clean. Let cool, top with whipped cream and sprinkle with lemon zest.