Strawberry shortcake will never change. Why should it? The perfectly balanced trifecta of strawberries, cream and cake make it hard to improve, but next to impossible to screw up. I should know. It’s the first cake I mastered. It’s also the official cake of my birthday season, and a sharp, creamy, highlight of summer.

My first strawberry shortcake recipe employed a Sara Lee All Butter Pound Cake. I sliced the rectangular loaf in half along a horizontal plane into top and bottom layers, plastered them with vanilla whipped cream and strawberry slices, and stacked them into a two-layer cake. It was a great starter recipe for a nine year-old boy. The hardest part was waiting for the frozen Sara Lee to thaw.

Like a fine gazpacho, my memory of that recipe has improved with age, even though I haven’t made or eaten a Sara Lee pound cake in four decades.  So as part of my 50th birthday festivities, I staged a Strawberry Shortcake showdown: Sara Lee vs what I’ve learned since.

Given the delicate architecture of strawberry shortcake, any adjustments must be subtle. Every addition must be in support of the existing three pillars: strawberries, cream and cake. Thus, I take a redundancy based approach, only adding flavors similar to what is already there.

Redundancy is a quality that can be annoying in some contexts, like say, a Powerpoint presentation. But in the kitchen it’s a powerful tool, and I use redundant ingredients in almost all of my recipes, sweet and savory. As background singers frame the lead vocals in a bandt, a chorus of similar flavors, like a karaoke machine, can improve things.

My friend Sue adds yogurt to her whipped cream, which is redundant in terms of both tartness and creaminess. Years back she used yogurt *instead* of whipped cream, a borderline violation for which her kids would eventually bust her. “As the kids got older and wiser they began demanding whipped cream, so now we use 50/50 full fat yogurt and whipped cream,” she says.

Sue is as no-nonsense as a heart attack. When she enters the kitchen to make lunch, everything better be in its place. Dessert after lunch is part of the daily bargain on the farm when you have a crew of child laborers, and if dessert is strawberry shortcake that day she mixes the cake batter while the oven preheats and gets it in before starting to fix lunch. No butter or eggs and hardly any sugar, her cake is a far cry from Sara Lee’s, but the kids never corrected her on that one, Sue says. And it takes less time to bake than a Sara Lee does to thaw. “You don’t even have to crack an egg.”

The other redundancies to my recipe include lemon, which adds a little sweetness, a lot of tang, and an aroma that dances gingerly with vanilla. I could have added the lemon to the pound cake, but decided to put it in the already sweet and tangy strawberry sauce, and put little chunks of tart rhubarb, rolled in sugar, into the cake. I also replaced the milk in Sue's cake recipe with buttermilk, for yet another shade of acid.

The Sara Lee version looked sharp. The smooth, almost golden pound cake juxtaposed with  the stately whipped cream, stiffer without yogurt, keeping everything perfectly in place. Eating it was a nostalgic experience, transporting me instantly across the decades. But with a life of experience behind me now, the Sara Lee was, alas, Plain Jane. It was stiff, and the flavors stayed separate when they should have mixed.

My relatively slovenly looking homemade version, with buttermilk rhubarb cake and lemon strawberry sauce, came together like a strawberry shortcake should. The flavors contrasted one another brilliantly, and the textures created a place of divine creamy sogginess that you could fall into forever, if only your belly could handle it. And while the cake took on moisture, it didn’t wilt under the creamy berry infusion. It held its shape, and even retained a measure of dry crumbliness.

The kids agreed, and were particularly impressed with the whipped cream and yogurt combo. At first they mistook it for store-bought whipped cream, and sprinted to the fridge in search of the can.

Since my new formulation is messier and harder to contain than the original Sara Lee, I served it as parfait, in glasses. Parfait happens to mean "perfect" in French, and strawberry shortcake parfait turns out to be the perfect way to combine the three pillars of shortcake, with every component mixing perfectly in each bite. It’s the parfait solution, if you'll excuse my French, and a reminder that with a little redundancy, you can teach an old recipe new tricks.

**Buttermilk Rhubarb Cake**  
*Serves 4-8*

2 cups flour  
½ teaspoon crème of tartar  
4 teaspoons baking powder  
2 tablespoons sugar  
½ teaspoon salt  
1⅓ cups buttermilk  
½ cup of oil (I use a mild, fruity olive oil)  
2 teaspoons vanilla extract or equivalent  
2 more tablespoons sugar (redundancy is my friend)  
1-2 sticks of rhubarb, peeled, sliced into 1/4–inch thick discs (about ⅓ cup)

Combine and mix dry ingredients except the second bit of sugar. Mix buttermilk and oil and, before they separate, immediately add them to the dry ingredients. Toss the rhubarb slices in the second sugar and add it to the mix, and stir it all together. Add to a 9 x 5-inch loaf pan.  Bake at 375, checking periodically, for about an 45-minutes or until a knife comes out clean.

**Whipped Cream**  
1 pint heavy cream  
¼ cup full fat yogurt  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract  
1 tablespoon sugar

Whip the cream. Add the vanilla, sugar and yogurt and gently stir.

**Strawberries**  
1 pound fresh strawberries, sliced  
3 tablespoons sugar (more to taste)  
Juice of one lemon (about 4 tablespoons)

Add the sugar and lemon juice to the pan and stir to dissolve the sugar. Add the strawberries and turn the heat to medium, stirring steadily once it starts simmering. Cook for about ten minutes, or until the strawberries fully soften.

**Assembling the Parfait**  
When the cake has cooled, cut it into inch-cubes. Add layers to your parfait cup in this order: cream, cubes of cake, sauce. Add layers until the cups are full.