

Lemon Polenta Sheet Cake with Cream Cheese Frosting

16 servings

I've never had a particularly deep love for classic yellow cake, but this sheet cake is an exception. The combination of polenta and lots of egg yolks makes it deep canary yellow and more savory than the ordinary birthday cake, and the texture is both tender and rich. (Everyone knows that cream cheese frosting is the best, so there's really nothing to say on that matter!) This is an ideal celebration cake, and it actually gets better on day two, giving you extra incentive to get your baking out of the way early. My friend Sohla El-Waylly helped me workshop the crumb (via text messages, no less!) while I was developing this; I'm grateful for her expertise.

FOR THE CAKE

1 cup (8 ounces/224 g) unsalted butter, cut into tablespoon-size pieces, at room temperature, plus more for the pan
3 cups (360 g) all-purpose flour, plus more for the pan
1¾ cups (420 ml) buttermilk, at room temperature
2 tablespoons (30 ml) extra-virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon (15 ml) pure vanilla extract
1 teaspoon (5 ml) almond extract
½ cup (70 g) medium- or fine-ground polenta
2 cups (384 g) granulated sugar
1 lemon
2 teaspoons (10 g) baking powder
1 teaspoon (4 g) baking soda
1 teaspoon (3 g) kosher salt
3 large eggs
3 large egg yolks

FOR THE FROSTING

8 ounces (224 g) cream cheese
8 tablespoons (4 ounces/ 112 g) unsalted butter, at room temperature
1 teaspoon (5 ml) pure vanilla extract
1½ cups (180 g) confectioners' sugar
1½ teaspoons (4 g) kosher salt
Sprinkles, for decorating (optional)

MAKE THE CAKE: Preheat the oven to 350°F. Grease a 9 by 13-inch pan with butter, then dust with flour, tapping out excess.

In a medium measuring cup, whisk together the buttermilk, oil, vanilla and almond extracts to combine. Whisk in polenta; set aside to let polenta hydrate while you prepare batter.

Place the granulated sugar in the bowl of a stand mixer or a large bowl and finely grate lemon zest over (set zested lemon aside). Use your fingertips to work zest into sugar until the sugar is fragrant and the zest is evenly dispersed (sugar will look a little fluffy), 2 to 3 minutes. Add flour, baking powder, baking soda, and salt and whisk well to thoroughly combine. Add the butter to dry ingredients, then fit mixer with the whisk attachment (or use a handheld mixer) and whisk on low to combine. Increase speed to medium and beat until the butter is in very fine beads and the mixture is pale yellow with a texture that resembles finely grated cheese, 4 to 5 minutes, scraping bowl down halfway through.

Whisk eggs and egg yolks into buttermilk mixture just until combined.

From the Market

Almond extract
Polenta
Cream cheese
Sprinkles (optional)

Spin It

Omit the almond extract, if you wish
Stone-ground grits (not quickcooking) can be used instead of polenta

At Home

Butter
Flour
Buttermilk
Olive oil
Vanilla extract
Granulated sugar
Lemon
Baking powder
Baking soda
Kosher salt
Eggs
Confectioners' sugar

Spin It

In place of buttermilk, whisk together 1¼ cups whole milk and ½ cup plain yogurt (not Greek)
Neutral oil can replace the olive oil

Use 2 teaspoons lime, orange, or grapefruit zest to replace the lemon zest, along with 2 tablespoons of the juice of whichever one you choose