



Our heritage food contributor, Karen Dudley of Woodstock's The Kitchen, calls for more melting sweetness and kindness instead of cruelty and war...

"Give the people
chocolate!"

Once upon a time, in the basement of a young Cavendish Square in Cape Town, was a little room where kids could watch movies and cartoons while mothers rode escalators and shopped.

Outside this little 'theatre' was Millie's Sweet and Chocolate Shop. While other kids counted cents (and rands?) for Tex Bars, Chocolate Logs and later Caramello Bears, I saved mine for the Belgian Truffles. I would have to save up more, giving up the boxes of Smarties and Bar-Ones for a single bite into the chocolate from another world!

It's not exactly that I'm a chocolate snob. But I enjoy chocolate the way I enjoy reading or watching an epic movie – I want to be immersed in another world. Chocolate does that for me. It takes me to another place.

Did it start with the seduction of Granny's thick slabs of Côté d'Or? Where did she get them from? They even smelled otherworldly. To this day, I confess to favouring Ritter Sport Peppermint and Côté D'Or over most others.

I think of eating my first earth-shattering bite of Parisian *Pain au Chocolat* and of languid sunny afternoons with my friend Irene, drinking tea and eating Twix, listening to Michael Franks and Carole King in her comfy threadbare chairs. At a famous café in Buenos Aires, I was served thick chocolate in a pot with warm milk on the side. I experienced the city in a unique way as I poured the two together, a *medialunas* (flaky crescent-shaped pastry) on the side.

Despite my prodigious appetite for delicious things, my greed is sated by a bite of good chocolate.

It is this belief in the perfect bite that has led me to sell bite-sized treats in The Kitchen. Take the preposterously named World Peace Brownies – a presumptuous name for some pretty good brownies that form part of the mainstay fare at my shop: if it's going to be

chocolatey, it has to be intensely chocolatey, not merely a chocolate flavour – its very essence must be chocolate. Only such purity can touch the chocolate Need in us. More of this kind of melting sweetness and kindness instead of cruelty and war!

My children, Ben and Maggie, have explained to me that people (and especially children) need chocolate. If there is going to be the indulgence of sweetness, it is expected that chocolate is present.

As a restaurateur, I know this to be true. How to give people what they want (chocolate) as well as express my own art? In choosing a spread of desserts for our Tuesday and Thursday dinners in The Dining Room, we say "Give the people Chocolate!" – a perfect French Chocolate Mousse, truffles to take your breath away, and perhaps even win them over with some of my own chocolate favourites: Chocolate Ginger Tart, Chocolate Mebos Tart, Halva Ice Cream with Spiced Chocolate Sauce; along with something citrusy, something fruity, and something caramelly or creamy.

What I find fascinating is that the essential chocolate experience is so very personal. My Auntie Cynthia's Chocolate Cake, for example, is the benchmark of chocolate cakes for me: unpretentious but light and dense at the same time with an un-interfering chocolate ganache. Throughout my childhood, her cake was faithfully present at most social and church gatherings. Most people will have a cake in their story that embodies their very personal definition of a good chocolate cake – a powerful and evocative memory.

Karen
email@karendudley.co.za

Author of *A Week in The Kitchen* and *Another Week in The Kitchen*.

Styling Johané Neilson • Photographs Francois Oberholster

Chocolate cake

- non-stick vegetable oil spray
- 3¼ cups cake flour
- 1 cup cocoa powder
- 1½ teaspoons bicarbonate of soda
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- 3 large eggs
- 2¾ cups sugar
- 3 cups vegetable oil
- 1½ cups buttermilk
- 1½ teaspoons white vinegar
- 1½ teaspoons vanilla extract

1 Preheat oven to 160°C; place a rack in the middle of the oven. Coat two 23cm cake tins with non-stick spray, line with baking paper and coat again with non-stick spray; set aside.

2 Sieve together the flour, cocoa powder, bicarbonate of soda, and salt in a large bowl; set aside. Using an electric mixer on medium speed, beat the eggs in a large bowl until frothy. With the mixer on high, gradually add the sugar; beat until the mixture is pale and has doubled in volume (about 7–8 minutes). Reduce the mixer speed to medium and gradually add the oil. Beat for about 3–4 minutes until emulsified (the mixture will resemble grainy mayonnaise). Reduce the mixer speed to low. Add the dry ingredients in three stages, alternating with buttermilk in two additions, beginning and ending with the dry ingredients. Beat to blend between additions, scraping down the sides and bottom of the bowl as needed. Add the vinegar and vanilla and beat just to blend. Divide the batter between the tins.

3 Bake until the cakes begin to pull away from the sides of the tins and a tester inserted into the centre of each comes out clean (about 50–55 minutes). Transfer the cakes to wire racks and let them cool in the cake tins for 15 minutes. Release the cakes and invert onto racks; let them cool completely.

CHOCOLATE ICING

Melt ½ cup plus 3 tablespoons unsalted butter in a large saucepan over low heat. Whisk in ½ cup cocoa powder (the mixture will stiffen). Slowly whisk in ½ cup milk and ½ teaspoon salt followed by 5 cups sifted icing sugar. Whisk until smooth (the icing will be soft). Allow to cool slightly for a runny consistency or chill the icing, stirring regularly, until spreadable (about 30 minutes).

Plate 1 cake and top with half the icing; spread it to the edges. (Use white chocolate ganache or caramel as an alternative filling.) Top with the remaining cake layer and spread (or pour) the remaining icing over generously. 🍴



Tip

The buttermilk in this cake makes for a moist and delectable sponge. Stir in 1 ⅓ cups of roughly chopped toasted pecans into the icing for a crunchy variation.