Brown Butter Apple Cranberry Harvest Cake

with Cider Caramel, Toasted Almonds and Sugared Cranberries

A tall brown butter cake truly full of apples, with cranberries for color and tartness, a crackly sugared crust and a cider caramel finish. Part apple cake, part pie, and it slices cleanly. From the Homestead Wife Life test kitchen, Recipe Test 1.

PAN	9 x 3 inch springform, set on a sheet pan	SERVES	12 to 14
OVEN	325°F (160°C)	BAKE	1 hr 40 min to 2 hr 10 min
FAN OVEN	300°F (140°C fan). Start checking 10 to 15 minutes early	DONE AT	200°F in the center
PLAN AHEAD	Bake on day 1, rest overnight, finish and serve on day 2	BROWN BUTTER	Can be made the day before

Ingredients

FOR THE PAN	WEIGHT	VOLUME
Unsalted butter, softened	15 g	1 tbsp
Turbinado sugar	50 g	1/4 cup

BOILED CIDER	WEIGHT	VOLUME
Apple cider, plus the juices from the warmed apples	720 ml	3 cups

Reduces to about 180 ml (3/4 cup) of thick syrup: 60 ml (1/4 cup) for the apples, 120 ml (1/2 cup) for the caramel.

APPLE LAYERS	WEIGHT	VOLUME
Firm, crisp apples, peeled, cored, sliced 5 to 6 mm thick	950 g	about 2 lb 2 oz
Granulated sugar	55 g	1/4 cup
Ground cinnamon	4 g	1 1/2 tsp
Boiled cider	60 ml	1/4 cup
Fresh cranberries (frozen is fine, straight from the freezer)	100 g	1 cup

Apple blend: about half Pink Lady, a fifth Granny Smith, and the rest Braeburn, Honeycrisp, Jonagold or Jazz.

BROWN BUTTER	WEIGHT	VOLUME
Unsalted butter	255 g	2 sticks plus 2 tbsp
Nonfat dry milk powder	15 g	about 3 tbsp

CAKE BATTER	WEIGHT	VOLUME
All-purpose flour	340 g	2 3/4 cups
Granulated sugar	250 g	1 1/4 cups
Orange zest, finely grated	6 g	about 1 tbsp
Large eggs, room temperature	4	4
Full-fat sour cream	220 g	scant 1 cup
Whole milk	40 g	2 tbsp plus 2 tsp
Baking powder	8 g	2 tsp
Baking soda	1.5 g	1/4 tsp
Fine sea salt	5 g	3/4 tsp
Vanilla extract	15 ml	1 tbsp

CIDER CARAMEL	WEIGHT	VOLUME
Boiled cider	120 ml	1/2 cup
Light brown sugar	100 g	1/2 cup, packed
Heavy cream	120 ml	1/2 cup
Unsalted butter	56 g	4 tbsp
Vanilla extract		1 tsp
Fine sea salt		1/4 tsp
Flaky salt, to finish		a pinch

TOPPINGS	WEIGHT	VOLUME
Sliced almonds	85 g	scant 1 cup
Fresh cranberries, for sugaring	100 g	1 cup
Sugar, for the syrup	50 g	1/4 cup
Water, for the syrup	50 ml	3 tbsp plus 1 tsp
Extra sugar, for rolling		about 1/4 cup

BEFORE YOU START. Weigh every ingredient and line them up in the order they go in. Why? Because when everything is laid out, you can't skip anything. If a bowl is still full at the end, you'll know exactly what you missed before the cake goes in the oven.

Day 1: bake day

1 Boiled cider. Simmer the cider until it reduces to about 180 ml (3/4 cup) of thick syrup, about an hour. Start it first; it reduces while you do everything else. How do you know it's close? Watch the bubbles. At first they're big, fast and splashy. As the water cooks off and the sugar concentrates, they turn small, slow and glossy.

2 Pan. Heat the oven to 325°F (160°C), or 300°F (140°C) for a convection or fan oven. Butter the base and sides of the springform generously, line the base with parchment, and press turbinado sugar all over the sides. Wrap a buttered parchment collar around the outside of the ring so it stands about 1 1/2 inches above the rim. Don't skip the collar: this cake rises past the rim, and the collar holds it up while it sets. Set the pan on a sheet pan.

3 Brown butter. Melt the butter, add the milk powder as it foams, and whisk until the solids turn a deep hazelnut brown. Scrape it all into a shallow dish and chill until soft but solid, about 65°F, 30 to 45 minutes, stirring every 10 minutes. The little brown flecks are the toasted milk powder. That's the flavor.

4 Apples. Toss the slices with the sugar and cinnamon in a wide skillet. Cover and warm over low heat, turning gently, until they read 140°F. Hold them between 140°F and 150°F for 10 minutes, never past 160°F. Why? Holding apples at that temperature sets their pectin, so the slices keep their shape through the long bake. Tip the juices into the simmering cider. Spread the apples on a sheet pan to cool, then toss with 60 ml (1/4 cup) of the boiled cider.

5 Batter. Rub the orange zest into the sugar, then cream it with the brown butter until light and fluffy. Give it time; it takes longer than most people think. Beat in the eggs one at a time, then the vanilla. Whisk together the flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Stir the milk into the sour cream. Add the dry ingredients in three parts and the wet in two. Stop the mixer before it's fully combined and finish by hand. Why? Every extra turn of the mixer builds gluten, and gluten makes a cake tough. Fold just until the last streak of flour disappears.

6 Layer. Build four layers of batter and three of apples, finishing with batter. Lay the apples in overlapping rings with small gaps, and tuck the cranberries into the gaps. Why the gaps? A solid sheet of apple is slippery. The batter bakes through the gaps and holds the slice together.

7 Bake. Bake 1 hour 40 minutes to 2 hours 10 minutes, until a thermometer in the center reads 200°F. Start checking at 1 hour 40 minutes. Go by the thermometer, not the clock: every oven is different. Why pull it at 200°F? Because the cake keeps cooking after it comes out. That stored heat carries the center the rest of the way. If the top browns before the center is done, lay a sheet of foil loosely over it.

8 Cool and rest. Cool in the pan for 30 minutes, then release the ring. Cool completely, at least 3 hours, then wrap and refrigerate overnight. Why overnight? The crumb sets, the apple juices settle into the cake, and a rested cake slices cleanly.

Day 2: finish and serve

1 Sugared cranberries. Warm the sugar and water until the sugar dissolves. Toss the cranberries in the syrup, drain, roll them in sugar, and let them dry on a rack for about an hour.

2 Almonds. Toast at 350°F (175°C) for 6 to 8 minutes, until golden.

3 Cider caramel. Simmer the boiled cider, brown sugar, cream and butter for 5 to 8 minutes, until it coats a spoon. Be careful: it bubbles up hard when the cream goes in. Off the heat, stir in the vanilla and salt. Cool until it's thick enough to drizzle.

4 Warm it up. Take the cake out of the fridge 60 to 90 minutes before serving. Cold mutes brown butter, and you want to taste it.

5 Finish. A light drizzle of caramel, the almonds, more caramel in lines, a pinch of flaky salt, then the sugared cranberries.

6 Serve. Serve at cool room temperature.

Storing

Keep the cake covered in the fridge for up to 3 days. Store leftover caramel in a jar in the fridge and warm it gently until it drizzles again. Add the sugared cranberries just before serving; they soften in the fridge.