

Katsura Morimura's Banana Cake

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Some recipes follow us around for most of our lives. This is the story of one such recipe.

I did not grow up thinking that I would be writing about food one day. But I was obsessed with reading about food from an early age. I used to pore over my mother's cookbooks and food magazines, and I re-read the food parts in my favorite books over and over. (The Chronicles of Narnia have great food parts. So do the Anne of Green Gables books.)

I discovered one of the books that was to have a profound and lasting impact on me at the school library of an elementary school in Hachioji, a suburban city in Tokyo. It was a Japanese book titled *Okashi to Watashi* (お菓子とわたし), Sweets and I, by Katsura Morimura. A memoir with sweets as the theme, each chapter was filled with achingly personal, bittersweet anecdotes from the author's life, and usually included a recipe. I read that library book so much until the spine was almost splitting. Later on, I bought a paperback of the same book with my scant pocket money.

Although the stories were wonderful, the recipes were what really intrigued me. I tried all the ones that I could afford to, and two of them became part of my regular repertoire. One was cutout "butter cookies", which didn't have that much butter in them but were really good and versatile. The other was banana cake.

The banana cake chapter is the very first one in the book. Morimura was in love with Australia, New Zealand and the surrounding region (she had written a book about traveling to New Caledonia in the 1960s, which became a big bestseller and launched her as an author), and to my twelve year old self, the banana cake seemed to have a distinctly southern Pacific vibe. She said the original banana cake she based hers on was baked wrapped in banana leaves on hot stones. Her version could not have been that easy to make for most of her readers though; it wasn't baked in hot stones, but it required an oven, which was still a luxury item in Japan in 1974, when the book was first published. (Ovens are still considered non-essential in Japanese kitchens, even in 2019.)

I was lucky enough to have access to an oven when I encountered the book a bit later, since my parents had remodeled their house after returning from living several years in the UK and the US. I baked that banana cake so many times that I lost count. It was a dark golden brown on the outside, with a most interesting crumb, moist and a greyish brown, flecked with purple. The best thing about it was the aroma - like the ripest, richest banana you have ever encountered, mingled with toasted butter.

Morimura continued to write off and on about food, sweets in particular. In 1985 she opened a pastry shop in Karuizawa, Nagano, a popular resort town for the wealthy. She continued publishing books regularly, sometimes releasing two books a year.

However, I didn't really keep up with her writing career, since our family moved away from Japan again. Later on, I lost that paperback in one of my numerous cross-ocean moves. I bought it again, and lost that copy too. The book and the recipes got filed away in the archives section of my mind.

A few years back, I ran across some hand written recipes I had tucked away in an old notebook. Two of the recipes in those faded, dog-eared pages were for the butter cookies and the banana cake. I must have written them down in my notebook when I was in high school. I made the banana cake in a fit of nostalgia, and they were just as good as I remembered. As I munched my way through the cake, I idly wondered what Katsura Morimura was up to, and went to look her up online.

Plagued with depression for much of her life, she had committed suicide in a hospital in 2004.

Afterwards, I found it difficult to think about making the banana cake or the butter cookies again. She had had a long and successful writing career, and had even opened the pastry shop of her dreams. After a divorce, she had found happiness with her second husband. But it was not enough to overcome her chronic depression. I did not know her personally, and there is no way to know the extent of her illness.

I put the handwritten recipes away, and eventually lost them in yet another move. Soon afterwards my long stretch of serious illnesses started. I became unable to even think about food, let alone write about it, for long stretches.

A few weeks ago, I suddenly got a strong urge to make that banana cake again. I wasn't in a very good place, mentally - last year was all kinds of hell. But even though my circumstances were very messy, physically I felt better than I had in years. And mentally, I was slowly trying to get my bearings again.

I was able to find a used copy of the book. I had to adjust the ingredients a bit - the original recipe was actually a lot vaguer than I had remembered. But once they were done and out of the oven, there they were again - the rich brown crust, the moist, purple-flecked crumb, and that buttery-banana flavor.

When I bite into a banana cake, which I am able to enjoy again at least for now, memories of my mother's kitchen in Hachioji, in a house that no longer exists, intermingle with passages from Katsura Morimura's book. Bittersweet recollections of my late father, with whom I shared a love of food and movies but little else, are intertwined with the final chapter in her book, which is about her late father, who spent all the money he had earned for a rare job (he too was a writer) and bought a box of cakes instead of paying the overdue bills. I think about how I have somehow become a writer, and wonder about how much she influenced me way back when I was 12.

This cake is very rich, so I can only have one cupcake at a time, or a slice if I bake it as a whole cake. But the buttery fragrance lingers in the air for some time.

(Footnote: Sweets and I (お菓子とわたし) is out of print, but is available in Japan as a used book. There is no English translation of it.)

A banana cake that is redolent with memories, and my love for a book since I was twelve years old. It is very buttery-rich and fragrant. On a practical note, it's a great way to use up over-ripe bananas.

Ingredients

Instructions

Pre-heat the oven to 200°C / 400°F.

Make the equipment you'll be baking the cake in ready by buttering it and/or lining it. (I used a muffin tin with a non-stick surface, which I buttered lightly.)

Sift the flour and baking powder together and set aside.

Put the milk and baking soda in a small pan and heat. When the milk foams up like crazy (this only takes a few seconds), take the pan off the heat. (This is the magic behind the mysterious purple streaks in the cake crumb.)

Mash the bananas with a fork.

Cream the butter together with the sugar and salt. Beat the eggs lightly and add to the butter-sugar mix. Add the foamed milk and bananas, and mix well until fairly smooth. Fold the flour mix in a little at a time using a spatula. Don't over mix.

Pour the batter into the muffin tin or whichever cake tin you are using. Bake until a wooden skewer stuck in the middle comes out clean. For muffins it takes about 25-30 minutes. For a whole cake it will take 10-15 minutes more.

This smells and tastes great fresh out of the oven, but tastes even better the next day and for a few days after that - if they last that long.

Notes

Cooking times will vary depending on the baking container you use.

There are two banana cakes by Katsura Morimura around. One is from her Karuizawa pastry shop days, and it's called "Banana Cake for forgetful ones". This one is an earlier version, simply called Banana Cake. I have adapted the ingredient amounts slightly, and the instructions are my own.

I baked the cake in a standard size muffin tin, but make no mistake - these are rich cakes, not muffins. You can bake it in a single square pan, a rectangular loaf pan or a round cake pan. If the cake manages to last for more than a day without disappearing, it can be cut in half and spread with strawberry or raspberry jam, which gives it another dimension.

