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CIR's Corner

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Hello everyone! "CIR's Corner" is my monthly article about international exchange and cultures around the world. I will introduce a variety of interesting international topics.

This Month's Topic: Christmas Cake

It's December, so the Christmas season has officially begun. Food is an important part of any Christmas celebration, and in Japan, the Christmas cake is the quintessential Christmas dessert. Many Japanese people assume that the Christmas cake tradition was imported to Japan along with Christmas itself. However, this is only partly true. While other countries do have Christmas cakes, they are very different from the pillowy white sponge cakes topped with whipped cream, strawberries, and Santa Claus figures that were invented in Japan. This month, I will introduce Christmas cakes from around the world.

The United Kingdom

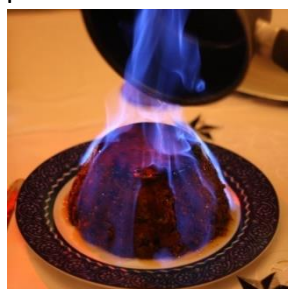


The traditional British Christmas cake is a dense, dark, and rich fruitcake containing raisins, candied cherries, candied citrus peel, and almonds. It is baked months before Christmas and soaked in brandy or stout to keep it moist and flavorful. The

cake is covered in a layer of almond paste called marzipan and then topped with sweet icing called fondant. Christmas decorations such as holly or miniature Christmas trees add the finishing touch.

In addition to cake, Christmas pudding is another traditional British Christmas dessert. The ingredients are similar to Christmas cake, but it is boiled or steamed instead of baked. What sets Christmas pudding apart is that it is doused in brandy and lit on fire at the table before serving. It's a festive tradition that Brits look forward to every Christmas.

Finally, mince pies are sweet, bite-sized pies filled with a mixture of dried fruit, sugar, spices, and brandy that are commonly eaten throughout the Christmas season. I first learned about them from my British and Australian friends in Japan. I mistakenly thought they were savory meat pies because the dried fruit mixture the pies are made from is called *mincemeat*. Traditionally, they did contain minced meat or beef suet, but modern recipes omit it.





France



In France, the classic Christmas cake is the *Bûche de Noël*. Before Christianity spread through Europe, pagans celebrated the winter solstice by burning a large log. Christians continued this celebration by burning a log every Christmas, so this cake is made to look like a real wooden log to represent this warm and cozy tradition.

The *Bûche de Noël* is made from a sponge cake rolled with buttercream, chocolate, or coffee-flavored filling. The outside is decorated with chocolate or frosting textured with a fork to look like tree bark, and it is often dusted with powdered sugar to look like snow. Sometimes, little mushrooms made of meringue or marzipan are added.

This cake is very popular in French-speaking countries and regions, such as Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Vietnam, and Quebec, Canada.

Italy



Italian Christmas cake is the tall, dome-shaped *panettone*. It's technically not a cake, but a type of bread, since it is leavened with yeast. This gives it a light and fluffy texture. It's filled with candied fruits

and raisins and has a slightly sweet, citrusy flavor. It is also popular across South America and in the African country Eritrea.

Germany



Stollen is Germany's traditional Christmas bread. Like *panettone*, it contains dried and candied fruits, but it also contains nuts and spices and is much denser. It is often baked with a rope of marzipan in the middle. The bread is topped with powdered sugar, but other than the sweet fruits, the dough itself is not very sweet. It is served in slices, and some people prefer it with butter or jam.

Norway and Denmark



The Norwegian celebratory cake is called *kransekake*, and the Danish version is called *kransekage*. In English, it means "wreath cake." It is an impressive cake made of 18 layers of concentric almond cake rings that are stuck together with icing.



It is made from only ground almonds, powdered sugar, and egg whites, so it is gluten-free. The cake resembles a Christmas tree, but it is not only eaten at Christmas; it is also eaten at weddings and other celebrations.

Australia and New Zealand



December is summer in the southern hemisphere, so that means Christmas in Australia and New Zealand is sunny and hot. Traditional British-style fruitcakes and mince pies are still popular, but many people down under prefer a lighter dessert called *pavlova*. It is a cake-shaped meringue topped with whipped cream and fresh fruits. The crisp and crunchy exterior contrasts well with the marshmallow-like center, and the fresh fruits make it a refreshing dessert for a summer Christmas celebration.

The United States



The United States, like other former British colonies, has inherited the Christmas fruitcake tradition from the UK. However, Americans generally do not like to eat them. They are more of a gag gift or something that you regift to someone else. There is a joke that there is only one fruitcake in America, and everyone keeps giving and receiving the same one! I mean, look at the picture above. Doesn't it look unappetizing compared to the beautiful

fruitcakes from other countries?

There is no standard American Christmas dessert, or Christmas meal for that matter. Thanksgiving is only one month before Christmas, and since it has a fairly rigid and consistent menu across the country, I feel that makes Americans want a more relaxed Christmas menu. The dessert a family eats depends on many factors, including their cultural background or even their mood that year.

According to a [Newsweek survey](#), 40% of Americans chose pumpkin pie as their favorite Christmas dessert. Pumpkin pie is a traditional Thanksgiving dessert, but many people love it so much that they eat it for both Thanksgiving and Christmas (my family did). The second most popular Christmas dessert was apple pie, followed by pecan pie in third place. Americans really love their pies!

Cake came in at fourth place, but the type of cake was not specified. This can be any kind of cake, from chocolate to red velvet. We generally do not eat Japanese-style sponge cakes, though.

Cookies came in fifth place. Many families bake sugar cookies or gingerbread cookies in Christmas-themed shapes, decorate them with icing, and leave them out on Christmas Eve for Santa Claus (with a glass of milk, and a carrot for the reindeer). This is a Christmas tradition my daughter looks forward to every year. The picture on the right is last year's work. Take note of the pink Santa Claus.



Fruitcakes came in second-to-last place, which is not surprising! We really, really don't like them!

Whichever cake (or other dessert) you choose this year, I hope you have a Merry Christmas! 🎅

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