

Fitz-Billies – the forgotten story of Cambridge University students' cakes

Margaret Murray (nee Molteno)'s old Cape Dutch recipe

by Marion Cran

Introduction

For over a century, the shop Fitz-Billy's, opposite the Fitz-William Museum in Cambridge, was famous. Generations of students took tea there, often when members of the family were visiting. One of the cakes, also called a Fitz-Billy, was a particular attraction. What no one enjoying them knew was that the recipe was not English at all, but an old Cape Dutch recipe which Caroline Murray, Sir John Charles Molteno's daughter, had got from her Dutch grandmother and had passed on to the porter of a Cambridge college when she was visiting her eldest son, Kenah, in 1902 when he was a medical student there.

The story is told by Marion Cran in her book, *The Gardens of Good Hope*, in 1927. Marion Cran was a well-known author of gardening books at the time. She wrote for popular magazines like *Queen* and *Good Housekeeping*. And two of her earliest books, *The Story of My Ruin* and *The Garden of Ignorance*, were based on her experience of buying a 14th century 'ruin' in Surrey and turning the house and garden into a beautiful home. In 1926, she got the idea of travelling to South Africa, where she had been born, and describing the very different kinds of garden there.

During her trip, she went to stay with Kathleen Murray, Dr Charles and Caroline Murray's younger daughter, on the fruit farm Kathleen was busying developing in Elgin, some 35 miles from Cape Town. Marion Cran wrote a delightful chapter about her stay and of the remarkable achievement of Kathleen, a single woman, becoming a successful farmer at the Cape. Kathleen told Marion the story of how Fitz-Billies came to Cambridge and gave her the recipe, as you can read here!

The story only became known to me by a most lucky chance. In 1985 a couple of friends of one of my cousins – Margaret Gibbs (her mother was Carol Williamson, who was born a Molteno) – chanced upon Marion Cran's book in an antiquarian bookseller's at Hay on Wye. They gave it to Margaret as a present, and Margaret years later lent it to me.

As for Fitz-Billy's, the tea-shop changed hands in 2012. The new owners are trying to put it back on its feet. But judging by the menu, they are not aware of the cake that had made their place so famous in the 20th century!

Robert Molteno

June 2013

'Real dried fruit'

We¹ loitered along, past the brilliant pointed Satsuma plums, the unripe pears; and I learned for the first time what almonds can taste like, unfolded from their green velvet jackets and eaten fresh.

They are quite different from the dried brown-skinned almonds we buy from the grocer in England and scald in boiling water before we skin them for cakes and candies. They taste, and they look, so unlike that they might well be another nut.

Imported foods, dry and emasculated, are what millions of Britons believe to be the correct thing. They never know any better. The first cake I tasted in South Africa reminded me by its delicious flavour that the dried fruits in it were still full of the sun. The raisins and sultanas, candied peel, lemon and so on had not been packed in crates, sweated through the tropics, travelled thousands of miles by sea and land – passed through scores of hands and at last found their way from the grocer's scales into the cakes of Britain. These were fresh dried fruits!

Those who have never seen it can hardly imagine this lotus land of sun and blue hills, where all the fruits of the earth grow in richest flavour and perfume. Remembering the adulterated foods expensively served in the shops and restaurants of crowded Europe, one finds a mighty refreshment in the wholesome quality of the African fare. They make the most beautiful cakes in that country; many South African families such as this one have inherited marvellous recipes from clever Dutch ancestors and they take pride in their excellent cooking.

From Cape Dutch recipe to University of Cambridge cake shop

Miss Murray told me how to make a Fitz-Billy, and I wrote down the recipe as I watched her make it; so as to pass it on to other good housewives. The recipe was inherited by her mother, who was a Molteno, from a Dutch great-grandmother at the Cape, and she in her turn gave it in 1902 to a porter at a Cambridge college to make cakes for her undergraduate relations. They became famous, for the man made them well; and to this day every undergraduate orders them for a tea-party. The shop where they are sold is opposite the Fitz-William Museum, hence their irreverent name of "Fitz-Billies," and most people think that they are made from an ancient Cambridge recipe; but they are the old Cape cakes made from Mrs. Murray's inherited family recipe.

This is the way to make a 'Fitz-Billy'

You take one pound of white granulated sugar, seven ounces of flour, eight eggs, one dessertspoonful of naartje powder. The ingredients are simple enough, but the secret is all in the making. Naartje is the Cape name for a tangerine orange; to make the powder you dry naartje peel in the oven and roll it into powder after it is brittle, putting it away in tins till it is needed. The old dry flavouring is always better than fresh; it improves by keeping. Pour the whites of egg into one basin; the yolks into another. Beat the whites till they rise stiffly to a point on the end of a fork; then pour the sugar slowly into the other basin and beat it hard with the yolks. The longer the yellow yolks are beaten with the sugar the more perceptibly the mixture pales. This beating is very important. It makes a great difference to the lightness of the cake.



Fitzbillies, 52 Trumpington Street, Cambridge – as it looks today

Now you take the flour and naartje powder, and sprinkle it slowly from a folded paper on to the smooth daffodil cream of the beaten yolks and sugar; throw in also lumps of the beaten white; it should be so stiff that it throws from the spoon; the flour and the whites are folded into the yellow. You do not beat much in the mixing; the beating has been done before, separately; you tangle as much air as you can into the cake. This that you are doing now is a folding and a tangling.

There are lumps of air, like Gruyère cheese-holes, in the mixture; it looks clear and fine. Sprinkle a well-greased tin with sugar and ground rice to make a frosty coating on the cake. Put in the mixture, and bake in a moderately hot oven. The tin must not be more than half full, to allow for rising; and it must bake slowly for an hour in an even temperature.

Lurking at the back of every woman's mind is a desire to be slim. It has lurked, very ineffectively, at the back of mine ever since I can remember. South African hospitality does not pander to this desire in the least. The house at Elgin kept its own pigs, cows, geese, and fowls. The hams are home-cured, the butter and bread home-made; cream and butter-milk are lavishly served with eggs, fruit and honey from the farm.

¹ The author, Marion Cran, and her host, Kathleen Murray, were wandering around the orchards on Kathleen's farm at Elgin.