

Murder, mystery, and cake

DELICIOUS: Mrs. Cob's Coconut Cake. EDWARD STEPHEN/THE EPOCH TIMES

By JOANNA CONWAY
Epoch Times Staff

Names are very important in their appeal and allure. It was on the very virtue of its name that I had to make Mrs. Cob's Coconut Cake. It sounded wonderfully old-fashioned. And then there was the picture: a crumbling, tender crumbed cake, with a layer of snowy white icing on the top. A cut slice revealed a layer of vividly bright apricot jam sandwiched between the two layers of pale sponge.

The cake is from a rather quaint sounding cook book called "The Cat Who ... Cookbook," which features delights such as Polly's Picnic Brownies and the marvelous sounding Vonda's Chocolate Whoppers. "The Cat Who ... Cookbook" I discovered is inspired by a series of murder mysteries begun in the 1960s by author Lilian Jackson Braun.

Lilian published three books, all to critical acclaim, before disappearing from the publishing scene in 1968 for over 18 years. Her light-hearted books were beginning to fall out of favor in the emerging climate of sex, violence, and rock 'n' roll.

It's easy to see why they would be seen as a touch naïve. The central protagonist in her books is Qwill, an aging ex-journalist who solves mysteries with the help of his two Siamese cats Koko and Yum-Yum. His main partner in crime, Koko is possessed of a sixth sense which alerts his owner to any impending danger, of which Qwill detects, naturally, with a tingling of his moustache.

The cake? Well that's pretty wonderful too. I was dubious at first because the recipe seemed to be composed of peculiar proportions (too much flour, too little fat, and all egg whites). But after a day maturing under my cake stand, it tastes

pretty fine. The icing is yummy: smooth and creamy, with a hint of crunch from the desiccated coconut. I am also particularly partial to the addition of almond essence in the sponge, an ambrosial combination with the coconut and apricot jam.

Mrs. Cob's Coconut Cake

Cake

250 ml (1 cup) sugar
1 stick (1/2 cup) unsalted butter
300 ml (1 1/4 cup) all purpose flour
15 ml (3 tsp) baking powder
175 ml (3/4 cup) full-fat milk
5 egg whites (reserving one of the yolks)
5 ml (1 tsp) almond extract
250 ml (1 cup) coconut

Filling

325 ml (1 1/3 cup) apricots in juice
25 ml (2 tbsp) white sugar
25 ml (2 tbsp) cornstarch

Icing

75 ml (6 tbsp) unsalted butter, room temperature
150 g (5 oz) Philadelphia cream cheese
250 ml (1 cup) icing sugar
Milk as needed
Coconut for decorating

Preheat the oven to 180° C (350° F). Grease two 23-cm (9-inch) pans and line with wax paper. Using an electric mixer, cream the sugar and butter together until light and fluffy. Sift in the flour, baking powder, and salt—alternating with the milk. If the texture seems too thick, add more milk.

Wash and dry the beaters of the electric mixer (to ensure they are grease free) and whisk the five egg whites in a clean

mixing bowl. Add the egg yolk, almond extract, and coconut to the creamed mixture, combining well with a spatula. When the egg whites have been beaten to the soft peak stage (they should leave soft peaks in the mixture when you take the whisk out), fold the whites very gently, adding them into the creamed mixture.

Pour the mixture equally into the two pans, leveling the tops with a palate knife. Bake in the center of the oven for 27-30 minutes. Check after 25 minutes. Cool the cakes in the pans for 10 minutes before removing to a rack to cool completely.

For the filling

Drain the can of apricots, reserving a couple of tablespoons of juice. Puree apricots and reserved juice in a food processor and heat gently with the cornstarch and sugar in a saucepan until the mixture thickens. Cool.

For the icing

Beat the softened butter and cream cheese together in a mixing bowl. Add the vanilla and sugar, adding a teaspoon of milk at a time until the desired consistency is reached. It should be pourable so it can run down the sides of the cake.

To assemble

Place one cake half on a plate (to catch the surplus icing) and spread with apricot filling. Sandwich with the other cake half. Spread the icing over the cake with a palate knife making sure it covers the sides. Sprinkle coconut over the top and sides of the cake.

(Adapted from *The Cat Who ... Cookbook* by Julie Murphy and Sally Abney Stempinski).

Pakistani girl a computer whiz at age 9

By MASOOMA HAQ
Epoch Times Staff

LAHORE, Pakistan—In 2004, Arfa Randhawa made international news when she earned a Microsoft Professional Certificate at the age of nine—something many don't accomplish until their 20s.

Arfa's achievement was so unusual that it set her apart from the majority of young girls worldwide let alone Pakistan—a country where over 50 percent of girls her age are illiterate. At the same time, Arfa's success is also a testament to her family who saw her abilities and nurtured them.

Now 13, Arfa is a confident and articulate person. She welcomed me into her family's living room in Lahore, where we sat down to chat about her success and future plans.

According to her grandmother, when Arfa was two-and-a-half she could memorize written and spoken passages in different languages. At the age of eight, her father noticed she was able to do extremely advanced tasks on the computer, like operate Microsoft Office fluently. He took her to the local computer institute, APTECH (Applied Technologies Computer Institute), in the city of Faisalabad.

At the institute, Arfa's talent was quickly recognized and soon she was teaching other, older students basic computer language. In 2004, Mr. Sohail, a teacher, encouraged Arfa, who was nine at the time, to take her first exam to get a Microsoft Professional Certificate—which she aced.

As news spread about her achievement Arfa was invited to visit Microsoft's headquarters in Redmond, Washington, where she met Bill Gates. She was interviewed by many international news agencies and received numerous prestigious awards at home.

After meeting Arfa, Mr. Somasegar, senior vice president, Developer Division at Microsoft, wrote about her on his blog.

"I had a lot of fun in meeting Arfa and getting a chance to understand what motivated her to strive for such an accomplishment at such a young age," he wrote. "My hat's off to Arfa's parents for nurturing her passion and talent and providing her with opportunities to learn and excel."

Arfa's parents were indeed instrumental in more ways than one in helping her to develop her talents with computers. Arfa's mother, Samina Amjad Randhawa, exudes an air of calm and determination, especially when it comes to her children.



NURTURING FAMILY: Arfa Randhawa (centre) and her two brothers Sarmad (left) and Dawood, with their mother Samina Amjad. MASOOMA HAQ/THE EPOCH TIMES

"I don't work outside the home, but am devoted to meeting the needs of all three of our children so they can reach their highest potential," she said.

Mrs. Randhawa explained that she used to drive Arfa one hour each way from Rawalpindi to Pakistan's capital city of Islamabad so she could attend school. In order to save money and put it toward her children's education, she chose to drive the children herself. In Pakistan, most women don't drive such long distances and are more likely to employ a driver.

Arfa's father has sold much of their property to pay for Arfa's education. He also recently retired from the Pakistani military so the family can be in a position to immigrate to Canada for the sake of their children's education.

Leaving Pakistan is not Arfa or her family's first choice, but they understand that Arfa and her brothers need resources and an environment that will help them develop their talents. They feel that the quality of education, for the most part, is not as good in Pakistan as in the United States or Canada, nor is it recognized internationally.

"Gifted children need to be challenged, otherwise they will get bored and [get] into negative things," said Arfa.

As for why the Pakistani government has not supported her financially or otherwise, Arfa said, "Pakistanis are not bad people, they are just not

farsighted."

Mrs. Randhawa thinks Pakistan as a nation does not understand the importance of nurturing and supporting talented youth and what it can mean for the country's success.

Arfa is on fast track to finish her high school degree in Pakistan, after which she hopes to attend MIT or Harvard University in the U.S. She now wants a mentor, like her parents and her earlier teacher, Mr. Sohail at APTECH, to guide her on the rest of her professional journey.

"I need polishing, like a black diamond needs polishing so its true beauty can be seen," she said, adding that she wants to use her talents to better humanity.

"My aim is to get into a position that can enable me to help people, especially the children of Pakistan."

In fact, the Randhawa family has already begun to help Pakistani children through a nonprofit organization called The Arfa Kiram Welfare Foundation that they started. The foundation provides computer education to young school-aged girls, and has a fully equipped computer lab run by a female teacher at the local girls' high school.

Though Arfa's story is uncommon, it is not hard to imagine that there are many more potential girls and boys in Pakistan that might blossom if given a nurturing environment, resources, and family that recognizes and supports their talent.

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