Cuban Layer Cake

CAKE CUBANO

SERVES 10 TO 12

Birdlike and energetic, my aunt Alicia Figueredo would beg her mother to let her help in the kitchen—whether it was chopping vegetables, stirring pots, or cracking eggs. It's a sentiment I understand because Tía Alicia is now my favorite person to spend time with in the kitchen. Like her mother before her, she lets me stay, so long as I stay busy. Working from the barely held-together cookbooks she brought with her from Cuba, she always brings elements of traditional Creole cooking to our family dinners, culminating in the classic celebration cake—rich cake layers of panetela *layered with* natilla *and covered in meringue.*

FOR THE *PANETELA*

2 cups unbleached all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
1 tablespoon baking powder
1 teaspoon kosher salt
12 tablespoons (1½ sticks) unsalted butter, cubed and at room temperature, plus more for greasing
1¼ cups sugar
3 large eggs
1 cup whole milk
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT:

Two 9 x 2-inch round cake pans

FOR THE *NATILLA*

1¼ cups water
½ cup sugar
1 cup milk
4 large egg yolks
2½ tablespoons cornstarch
⅛ teaspoon kosher salt
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

FOR THE MERINGUE

2 large egg whites
1 cup sugar
⅓ cup water
⅛ teaspoon cream of tartar

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Butter two 9 x 2-inch round cake pans with butter and dust inside with flour, shaking out the excess. Set aside.

To prepare the panetela, sift together the flour, baking powder, and salt in a medium mixing bowl and set aside.

In a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, beat the butter and sugar on medium speed until pale and fluffy, about 5 minutes. Add the eggs one at a time, beating for about 30 seconds after each addition.

In a small measuring cup, combine the milk and vanilla. On low speed or by hand, add the flour mixture to the sugar-and-butter mixture in three batches, alternating with the milk and ending with the flour. Do not overmix.

Pour the batter into the prepared cake pans. Set in the preheated oven and bake until lightly golden and a tester comes out clean, 30 to 35 minutes. Remove the cakes from the oven and allow to rest in the pans for 10 minutes. Run a thin knife around the edge of each cake pan and invert over a rack, then invert again so each cake is upright. Allow to cool completely before filling.

To prepare the pastry cream, combine the water and sugar in a saucepan and bring to a boil. Simmer over medium heat until it thickens slightly and registers 200°F on a candy thermometer, 5 to 10 minutes. Set aside to cool.

Combine the milk, egg yolks, cornstarch, and salt in a mixing bowl and whisk until the mixture is well combined and there are no visible yolks. Pass the milk mixture through a fine-mesh sieve into a separate 3- to 4-quart saucepan. Whisk in the cooled syrup and cook over medium-low heat, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, until it thickens and coats the back of the spoon, 25 to 30 minutes. Remove the saucepan from the heat and stir in the vanilla. It will continue to thicken as it cools. If not using immediately, cover the surface of the cream with parchment paper and refrigerate until chilled, up to 2 days.

Prepare the meringue. Combine the sugar and water in a saucepan and bring to a boil. Simmer over medium heat until it reaches the thread stage and registers 230°F on a candy thermometer, 10 to 15 minutes.

In a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, beat the egg whites on low speed until foamy, about a minute. Add the cream of tartar and increase the speed to medium until they hold soft peaks. Add the syrup, a little at a time, and beat on high speed until it forms stiff, glossy peaks.

To assemble the cake, place a cake layer on a plate or cake stand. Cover with the pastry cream and top with the remaining cake layer. Generously cover the cake with the meringue frosting.