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COOKING-UP HISTORY

Louisa Macculloch's HARD CIDER CAKE

Article by C.G. Wolfe • Photography by Kelly Joyce

Hard cider is back in America's hearts and taverns, but the quality and complexity of today's artisanal ciders have also found a place in the kitchen. Cider's being used in a variety of recipes from sauces to braising, and is also re-emerging in baked goods, a tradition that dates to the late 18th century when locally fermented cider and its distilled progeny "apple jack" were substituted for more expensive wines and brandies.

At Macculloch Hall Historical Museum (MHHM) in Morristown, Louisa Macculloch recorded 160 recipes in her handwritten family cookbook. It's a treasure trove of culinary history that's being interpreted and adapted to the modern kitchen by Cynthia Winslow, MHHM's Curator of Education and Communications. The project provides website visitors and social media followers with a fun and interactive way to connect with MHHM's past and cook-up a taste of history in their own kitchens with recipes for all levels.

"It was really an adventure every week because some of the recipes were like three sentences," said Winslow. "For example, it will just say 'butter the size of an egg' or 'bake in a haste.' So trying to convert that to what temperature for the oven? What size pan do I use? That was a lot of investigating."

Among the recipes that the Macculloch's left for Cynthia to discover, 110 were desserts, including Louisa's version of Hard Cider Cake; a popular late 18th and 19th century cake that almost vanished after Prohibition, but was preserved by the Amish and a handful of New England hard cider holdouts.

It's a simple and traditional American dessert, but Louisa's period version posed its own challenges in translation, including how many ounces are in a "tea cup" of flour and finding a substitute for a teaspoon of "pearl ash;" a lye known as potassium carbonate that was made by filtering water through hardwood ashes and letting it evaporate. The resulting "ash" was used as a leavening but was also the basis for homemade soap and used in gun-



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powder. Its inclusion in Louisa's recipe, while inconvenient from a modern baking standpoint, was an opportunity for Winslow to gain insights into the cake's origin.

"You can actually date recipes from what ingredients they have so you would say this recipe is probably 1780 - 1840," said Winslow. "In the 1850s, they had baking soda and baking powder. If they're listing that (pearl ash) as an ingredient, it means that that's an earlier recipe."

George Perrott Macculloch (1775-1858) and his wife, Louisa, built their federal, Georgian style home on the site of a modest 18th century farm house, and literally on top of the farmstead's kitchen. A rustic, inviting space, it's the only remaining room from the site's colonial era and seemed the ideal place to sample the results of Winslow's testing, tasting, and sleuthing.

If Louisa's shadow was looking over Winslow's shoulder, she must have been pleased. The cake was a delightful, nostalgic experience; rich and dense like a pound cake but with loads of flavor. The hard cider was reminiscent of cakes with a brandy or rum but not overwhelming or overly alcoholic and its warmth tasted like Thanksgiving and Halloween, making it a perfect autumn or holiday dessert.

Visitors can experience everyday American history as it happened at MHHM, which is also home to the largest collection of original work by political cartoonist Thomas Nast. 45 Macculloch Avenue, Morristown, NJ. Visit maccullochhall.org for more information.

Louisa's Recipe

"3 tea cups of flour, 2 tea cups of sugar, 1 ditto of butter, 1 ditto of cider. 2 eggs to be mixed as pound cakes and when all prepared for the oven, add a teaspoonful of pearlash to the cider and stir it in."

Adapted Recipe

3 c. flour • 2 c. sugar • 1 c. softened butter (2 sticks)
1 c. hard cider • 2 eggs • ½ tsp. baking soda

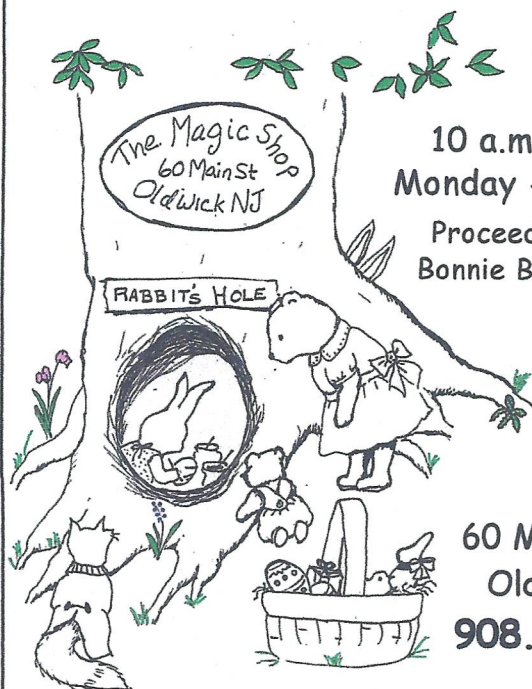
Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Cream butter and sugar. Add two eggs and sifted flour. Stir ½ teaspoon of baking soda into cider (this will fizz up) and add. Pour mixture into greased loaf pan. Bake for 50-60 minutes until a toothpick comes out dry. Let cool in loaf pan for 20 minutes. Enjoy with vanilla ice cream.



Cynthia Winslow, MHHM's Curator of Education and Communications.

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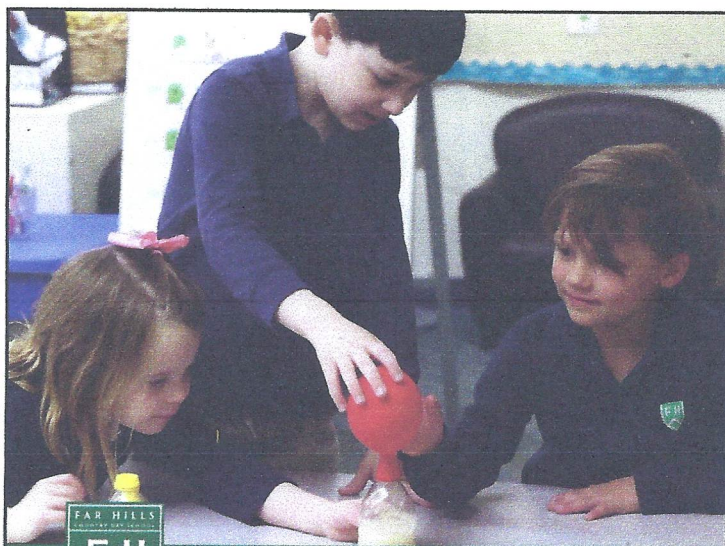
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