

New Year's Cakes

The Chinese place great importance on anything that reflects their inner desires, and *niangao*, which means New Year's Cake, rhymes with "higher year," connoting the attainment of hopes and ambitions. In traditional households, *niangao* are left on tables, shelves or altars throughout the festive season as "weights," to secure solidity and substance in the ensuing year. They are also offered to the Kitchen God before he ascends to heaven to give his annual report on each household. This great event takes place on the 23rd or 24th day of the month preceding the Chinese New Year. The sweet, sticky cake is an incentive to obtain a sweetly-worded report from the god. Some households rely on the stickiness of the cake to moderate the Kitchen God's speech when recounting misdeeds. This sticky cake can be eaten by itself but is too bland for most palates and is often rolled in freshly grated coconut or cooked in batter. Sometimes it is sandwiched between pieces of taro or sweet potato and fried.

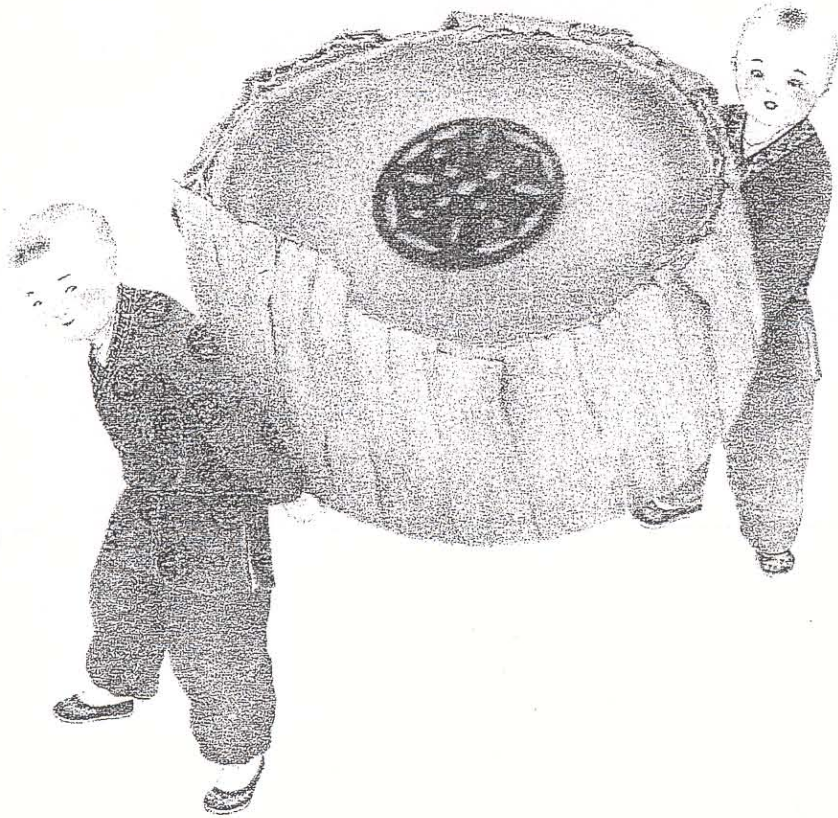
- 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ cups (450 g) caster sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup (125 ml) water
- 4 small round cake pans (each
4 in/10 cm in diameter)
- 2 large banana leaf sheets, soaked
in hot water until soft
- 3 cups (360 g) glutinous rice
flour, sifted
- 2 cups (500 ml) water
- 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups (140 g) wheat starch
(*tung meen fun*), sifted
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup (125 ml) oil
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup (125 ml) thin coconut milk
- 2 tablespoons Golden Syrup
(page 110)
- 1 cup (100 g) freshly grated
coconut, mixed with $\frac{1}{2}$ tea-
spoon salt (this serves 1 cake)

Makes 4 cakes

Preparation time: 1 hour + overnight
setting

Cooking time: 4 hours

- 1 Bring the sugar and water to a boil in a saucepan, stirring until the sugar is dissolved. Reduce the heat to low, simmer for 15 to 20 minutes until the mixture has turned into a thick syrup. Remove and set aside to cool. Leave the syrup overnight.
- 2 Cut each banana leaf sheet into 16 strips each measuring 8 x 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ in (20 x 5 cm). Lay a strip across the center of a cake pan, with one end in the pan and the other end sticking up over one edge of the pan. Lay a second strip over the first, this time allowing the leaf to stick up on the other side. Lay third and fourth strips perpendicular to the first and second strips in the same manner, overlapping in the middle and sticking up on the sides. Repeat this process of laying the banana strips, until the base and sides of all 4 cake pans are lined. Trim off the extra lengths of banana leaf around the rims of the pans with a pair of scissors.
- 3 In a mixing bowl, mix the glutinous rice flour and water using a wooden spoon, or using a mixer at slow speed for 6 to 10 minutes. Stir in the wheat starch and oil, and thoroughly mix until well blended, then add the coconut milk, a little at a time, and stir well. Finally add the Golden Syrup and cooled syrup, mixing well after each addition, to produce a smooth batter.
- 4 Pour the batter equally into each cake pan. Place in a large heat-proof dish and steam in a covered wok or steamer over high heat for 3 to 4 hours, adding more hot water as needed. The cakes are done when they have turned brown. Carefully remove the rice cakes from the steamer and pour off any liquid on the surface of the cakes. Allow to cool and set at room temperature overnight.
- 5 To remove the rice cakes from the pans, run a knife between the leaves and the sides to loosen, then place a plate over the pan and



invert it. Refrigerate the rice cakes in their banana leaf coverings until ready to use.

6 When ready to eat, peel off the banana leaf coverings and cut each cake into quarters, then slice into thick pieces. Place in a heatproof dish and steam in a wok or steamer for 5 to 10 minutes until soft. Remove from the heat. While the cake is still hot, dab each piece in the grated coconut, turning over a few times, until it is well coated on all sides. Arrange the coated pieces on a platter and serve immediately.

NOTES: If banana leaves are not available, use aluminum foil to line the cake pans or just grease them, then steam and store the rice cakes in them until ready to eat. To serve the rice cake deep-fried in batter, prepare a batter by combining $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups (160 g) of long grain rice flour, $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (185 ml) of water, 6 tablespoons of coconut milk and a pinch of salt to make a smooth batter. This yields enough batter to deep-fry 1 rice cake. Slice the rice cake into $\frac{1}{2}$ -in (1-cm) thick slabs. Dip the pieces in the batter to coat them evenly and deep-fry in very hot oil over medium heat for about 2 minutes on each side. Serve hot or at room temperature.