

Chinese New Year Prosperity Cakes Fat gow (Cantonese) or Fa gao (Mandarin)

Introduction

Many societies around the world usher in the new year by eating lucky foods. In China, people eat new year's cakes (nian gao in Mandarin) as part of their celebration. Every region of China cooks and eats different types of nian gao. They come in different shapes, sizes, colors and textures.

Fat gow (Cantonese) or fa gao (Mandarin) are one type of sweet cake served for Chinese New Year. These steamed cakes are traditionally offered to the gods to ensure a "sweet" new year. This version is a southern Chinese, specifically Cantonese, interpretation of the cake. What makes it Cantonese is the use of a rising agent, in this case baking soda. Traditionally, cooks would use yeast to make this cake but nowadays baking soda is more common due to ease. This recipe also uses a mix of wheat flour and rice flour to create its distinctive sticky-fluffy texture.

Sweet cakes and treats are a special favorite of the kitchen god. Traditionally, every family had a kitchen god statue (or a print) in their kitchen. The kitchen god would watch over the family throughout the year, and the kitchen god would return to heaven just before the new year to report back on every household's activities during the past year. The Jade Emperor, the most important god, would dole out rewards or punishments based on the kitchen god's reports. To ensure the kitchen god says nice things, every family would place sweet offerings (some might call them bribes!) like cakes, candy, and fresh fruit on the altar. Sometimes families even smeared honey over the lips of the kitchen god to "sweeten" his words. (A more cynical interpretation is that the honey seals the kitchen god's lips shut, preventing him from saying bad things).

Some families still offer the gods sweet cakes today. Of course, families also enjoy these new year treats for themselves. Fat gow translates as "to grow higher". Families eat these cakes with the hopes that the new year will be better than the last.

Ingredients

- 1 Cup Cake flour. Softasilk is the most commonly available brand. You can substitute all-purpose flour if cake flour is unavailable. Do not use whole wheat flour.
- ¼ Cup Rice flour. Purchase the plain rice flour. Do not buy the "sweet" rice flour or "glutinous" rice flour. Those are used for other foods like tangyuan or sticky sweet dumplings. If you are buying the brand from Thailand with the elephants on it, pick the red bag and not the green bag. Bob's Red Mill makes a good rice flour. Look for it next to the wheat flour in the baking aisle.
- ½ to ¾ Cup Light brown sugar. If you're visiting an Asian supermarket, you can pick up slabs of brown sugar candy. To use the slab sugar, break off chunks and dissolve in water before using. You'll need 1 ½ to 2 sticks of slab sugar.
- 1 teaspoon Baking powder. Do not use baking soda.
- 7 oz Water. Room temperature tap water is fine.

Optional ingredients:

- Neutral flavored cooking spray like PAM
- Vanilla extract
- Red food coloring or beet juice. Some like to color their cakes red for more luck. I'm not fond of food coloring so I skip it.

Equipment

- 1 Large mixing bowl
- 1 Whisk or wooden spoon or silicone spatula. A whisk is preferred, but a wooden spoon or silicone spatula are fine.
- 1 Large tablespoon or Chinese soup spoon for portioning the batter
- 1 Liquid measuring cup
- Dry measuring cups
- Measuring spoons
- Steamer basket with lid
- Wok or other large pot for steaming
- Toothpicks or small skewers for testing doneness. In a pinch, the tip of a chopstick also works.
- Potholders or dry kitchen towels

Fat gow batter needs to be steamed in small cups or ramekins. I hate to ask people to buy special equipment for a one-off recipe, so get creative with what's around your house. Things I've used:

- Small rice bowls
- Small ceramic ramekins
- Small cupcake or baking cups. Amazon sells these:
<https://www.amazon.com/AmazonBasics-Reusable-Silicone-Baking-Cups/dp/B01KWTGAVQ>
- Small ceramic teacups
- The steaming cups you choose should ideally be taller than they are wide to ensure proper "growth" in your fat gow. If it's too wide, the cakes will spread out instead of rising up.
- Make sure your cups are heat-proof!

Helpful equipment, but not necessary if it's too much trouble:

- Cupcake liners (choose the size that fit your steaming cups) or parchment paper to line your steaming cups. If you aren't using liners, just spritz your steaming cup with a little PAM before putting in the batter.
- If using cupcake liners, pick red, pink, and gold liners for a festive touch.

Directions

1. Measure your flours, sugar, and baking powder.
2. Add these ingredients to your clean mixing bowl.
3. Whisk these ingredients together. Make sure there's no lumps or bumps from the brown sugar. Set aside.

4. Measure 7 oz of water. 7 oz is just a touch above the $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (6 oz) and a bit below the 1 cup line (8 oz). This is where you put your high school chemistry liquid measuring skills to use.
5. Slowly add the water to the bowl of dry ingredients, mixing well with a whisk. If desired, add a few drops of vanilla extract to the batter. If using food coloring to create pinkish-red cakes, add a few drops of food coloring. Keep stirring until the batter is smooth and gently bubbling. This might take a few minutes. There shouldn't be any lumps or clumps. The batter should have the consistency of pancake batter.
6. Let the batter rest for five minutes. Use this time to prepare the steamer. Add water to the steaming vessel and turn the stove on to high heat.
7. While waiting for the water to boil, prepare the steaming cups. If using cupcake liners or parchment paper, line the steaming cup and spritz each liner with cooking spray. If not using liners, spray the cooking spray directly on the cup to prevent the batter from sticking.
8. Use a large tablespoon or Chinese soup spoon to portion the batter. Fill the batter as close as possible, without spilling, to the top of the steaming cup. Once the cups have been filled, place the filled cups in the steamer baskets.
9. Check your stove. The water should be boiling. Using potholders or dry kitchen towels, carefully move the steamer baskets to the pot and gently place over the boiling water. Place the lid on top of the highest steamer basket. Be careful around the steam! Steam burns are painful.
10. Set a timer for 20 minutes and make yourself a drink while you clean up the dishes.
11. After 20 minutes, check the doneness by inserting a toothpick in one of the cakes. If it comes out clean, it's done. The cakes take about 20 minutes to steam.
12. With potholders or dry kitchen towels, carefully remove the steamer baskets from the pot. Be careful around the steam. Wait a few moments for the cakes and the steamer basket to cool down. Eat and enjoy when the cakes are warm.
13. Cakes are best enjoyed warm. They can be reheated for 10-30 seconds in the microwave. Store after cakes have cooled to room temperature. Cakes should be eaten within 2-3 days.

Yield: 6 cupcake-sized cakes. This recipe can be doubled.

Preparation information for Zoom participants:

I recommend that participants watch the program and then cook later. OR they can make everything up to the steaming part with me and then steam the batter after the program is done. This is because it's unsafe to leave a pot of steaming water unattended. Also, one needs to give their full attention while steaming to avoid steam burns (which are very painful and dangerous, and not to mention a bad way to start the new year!)

Fat gow can be made in less than an hour, with steaming time included. It's a simple recipe but it takes a little patience and practice to get it just right.