

# Step by step to Easter babka

By Alan P. Mannouser  
Special to the Tribune

One of Dobra Bielinski's favorite cakes is the dense, richly sweet, rum-and-raisin cake called *babka*. It's a traditional cake that finishes Easter meals in many countries, giving a delightful warmth during the still-chilly days of spring. As owner of Delightful Pastries (5927 W. Lawrence Ave., 773-545-7215), which specializes in classic Old World baked goods, she gets to make plenty of *babkas* around this time of year.

"Every grandmother in Poland makes a *babka*, but it's really universal," Bielinski said. "In France they call it *savarin*, in Italy *panettone*, in Germany *kugelhopf*. Each is essentially the same cake with variations. For example, the Italians use more raisins and often add citron. But once they bake it, put on the glaze or the powdered sugar, it's done. In the Polish version we add a little extra step. We soak it."

The warm cake, fresh from the oven, gets a bath in a simple syrup of sugar, water and rum that seals it, giving it a longer shelf life while imbuing it with moistness and extra flavor.



Tribune photo by Alex Garcia

Pastry chef Dobra Bielinski of Delightful Pastries bakery takes pride in her rendition of *babka*, an Old World yeast cake.

## Babka

**Preparation time:** 35 minutes  
**Standing time:** 2 hours, 50 minutes  
**Cooking time:** 2 hours  
**Yield:** 12 servings

■ This recipe is adapted from Dobra Bielinski of Delightful Pastries bakery in Chicago.

### Dough:

- 1/4 cup very warm water (105-115 degrees)
- 1 package (1/4 ounce) active dry yeast or 1 piece (1/2 ounce) fresh yeast
- 1/2 cup plus 1 teaspoon sugar
- 3 1/2 cups flour
- 6 egg yolks
- 1 1/2 sticks (3/4 cup) unsalted butter, melted, cooled
- 1/4 cup milk
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- Finely grated zest of 2 lemons
- 1 cup raisins
- 1/2 cup candied orange peel, see note

### Soaking syrup:

- 1 cup water
- 1/2 cup each: sugar, rum
- 1 teaspoon vanilla

### Glaze:

- 1 cup confectioners' sugar, sifted
- 1 to 3 tablespoons water, enough to reach desired consistency

### Raisins and candied orange peel, optional

1. For the dough, mix the water, yeast, 1 teaspoon of the sugar and 1/4 cup of the flour in a bowl with electric mixer (fitted with a

dough; Bielinski prefers a clump of fresh yeast, although a packet of dry yeast will suffice. And don't skimp on the butter, Bielinski said. The cake gets its flavor mostly from the butter and rum.

The cake's subtle flavors depend upon each cook's preferences. Bielinski is generous with lemon zest but frugal with the raisins. But any number of fruit or nut flavors may be added, according to preference. Bielinski's grandmother always added some drops of orange oil. "And you can't go wrong with a little bit of vanilla," she said.

Bielinski kneads the thickening dough by hand to ensure everything gets evenly distributed. The dough gets shaped into a circle before being set into a deep, round, indented baking form or a Kugelhopf pan. She places candied orange pieces on the bottom of the pan so the cake will show the glistening fruit pieces around its top.

The dough requires an hour or two to rise. When risen to just about a quarter-inch below the top of the pan, it's ready for the oven.

#### The soak

The cake should get a quick second bake before the soak. Bielinski turns over the form, knocks the cake onto a sheet pan, lets it rest a minute and then puts the it back in the oven for another five minutes to give it a good firmness, eliminating any "doughiness" within.

"You want a pleasant, dark, golden color," she said.

It should cool, then go into a warm bath—the water-sugar-rum syrup—for just a few seconds, but the syrup will penetrate the warm bread.

"The soaking goes way back," Bielinski said, "probably started by people who needed a cake to stretch for a week. They would make a simple sugar-and-water mixture, adding whatever homemade liquor they had in the house. My grandmother made the cherry-based spirit called kirsch, which substituted for rum."

4. Shape the dough into a ring shape, place it in a well-greased kugelhopf pan or tube pan. Cover with a kitchen towel; let rest in a warm, draft-free place until dough rises to ¼ inch below the top of the pan, about 2 hours.

5. Heat oven to 325 degrees. Bake the cake until an inserted tester tests clean, 45-60 minutes. (Cover with foil if it browns too quickly.) Remove the cake from the mold; transfer to a baking sheet. Return to the oven until cake browns completely on all sides and develops a rich caramelized flavor, about 5-10 minutes. Let cool on a wire rack 15 minutes.

6. Meanwhile, for the soaking syrup, heat the water and sugar to a boil in a medium saucepan over medium-high heat. Cook until sugar dissolves, about 1 minute; remove from heat. Add rum and vanilla; pour into a bowl big enough to hold the babka. Place the cake in the bowl with the syrup. Carefully rotate the cake to coat all sides with syrup; remove to the baking sheet. Let stand 10 minutes before glazing, allowing the rum syrup to slowly penetrate.

7. For the glaze, whisk the confectioners' sugar with water to desired consistency. Drizzle the glaze over the top of the cake; sprinkle with raisins and candied orange peel. Slice with a serrated knife.

**Note:** Candied orange peel is available in the baking section of some specialty markets.

#### Nutrition information per serving:

438 calories, 28% of calories from fat, 14 g fat, 8 g saturated fat, 133 mg cholesterol, 74 g carbohydrates, 6 g protein, 118 mg sodium, 2 g fiber

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