

Asi's Birthday Cake

Months before the actual event, my older son told me that he would be very happy if I made him a lemon meringue pie for his birthday. “You know, the meringue with the lemony filling.”

“Oh,” I said, “you mean an angel pie, or what is called a lemon pavlova.”

“Yes, that's it. It will be my sixtieth birthday, and I would really like something special. I still remember that taste after all these years.”

“But Asi,” I said looking at him doubtfully, “you know I haven't baked for ages, and I haven't made a pavlova for even longer. It could be a big catastrophe and you would be terribly disappointed.”

“Never mind, I'll take the risk. If you don't try you'll forget completely and that's *haval* (a shame). Nothing ventured, nothing gained, you used to tell us.”

“Well, I'll think about it,” I replied.

I tucked his request away at the back of my mind, but every once in a while he would remind me, and I assured him that I hadn't forgotten.

Years ago, I would make the traditional American lemon meringue pie. First, one baked the pie crust, then prepared the lemon filling and poured it into the crust. Finally, I whipped up a meringue, spread it over the lemon custard, and baked it in the oven for a few minutes till it was lightly browned. Almost foolproof.

But later I had a girlfriend who made a lemon pavlova – out of this world! After seeing and tasting it, I decided I just had to learn to make it. It was so delicious and festive.

The cake needs to be made in two stages, and the directions are deceptively easy. You bake a meringue, which consists only of egg whites and sugar, and when that cools, preferably the next day, you prepare the lemon filling from the yolks, sugar and lemon juice,

cook it to the right consistency in a double boiler, and spread it over the white base. If it's too thin it stays runny and doesn't set, and if it's too thick it contracts in volume and is not enough to cover the base. Then the whole preparation is covered with whipped cream and some decoration. My friend used to prepare it in a deep dish, and serve it with a spoon but I preferred to use a spring form, and learnt to remove the rim so that I could cut the cake in slices.

Sounds easy, but meringue has a mind of its own, and doesn't always come out as it should. Perhaps the eggs weren't quite so fresh and you don't get nice stiff egg whites standing up in peaks. The oven may get too hot, or remain too cold, so the mixture may not bake to the right consistency so it can be cut with a knife. Or it may rise too high and overrun the pan, making a nice mess in the oven; sometimes it rises then flops like a pancake, or it bakes nicely and then cracks down the middle so that there is no base to hold the filling.

All these thoughts ran through my mind as I considered when would be the best time to tackle Asi's request. If your child believes you can do miracles, you have to attempt to produce at least one. The pavlova is not a cake one can make in advance and store in the freezer, though it can sit in the refrigerator for three or four days.

It was decided to celebrate the birthday during our family Hanukkah evening, the evening of the sixth candle, which was my late father's birthday. By the time the day arrived to prepare the cake, I was already tired, and because of various other factors would have to do it in the evening. I learned long ago that one shouldn't bake when one is tired, but this time I had no option.

I separated the eggs and prepared the ingredients, but when I uncovered the mixer, I found I had forgotten how to work it. It took almost half an hour before I rediscovered this secret. The egg whites beat up beautifully, but as I hardly ever used the oven, I wasn't sure

how to set the right temperature. Saying a prayer, I placed the meringue in what I hoped was a cool oven, and went to watch the news. Of course, I promptly forgot about it.

When I came back into the kitchen, I found that the meringue had partly spilt out into the oven. This left one side of the pan without coverage and the base, which should have been about an inch or thicker, was not more than a centimeter in the middle but quite high round the edges. I looked at my creation in despair. I didn't have the stamina, or enough eggs, to start all over. I scraped up the parts that had escaped from the form and managed to patch it up so that it would hold the filling. I left it to cool. Next morning I made the filling according to instructions and was satisfied with the result. It spread nicely over the meringue, hiding its imperfections.

Then I had to whip the cream. Because I had completely forgotten that the cream and the container for it should be chilled, it didn't whip up as it should have, and remained very fluid. Flustered, I was at a loss for a solution and just put everything into the fridge. I had to find a way to dress up the cake.

Next morning, the day of the party, the maid came in to make another batch of *latkes* (potato pancakes), and I showed her my dilemma. She took the eggbeater, and attacked the cream with far more energy than I had; it took some time but she succeeded in getting the right consistency.

I spread it over the lemon filling and now the cake looked just perfect. In the evening it was received and eaten with much pleasure. I had created my miracle, and Asi was very happy, which was of course the object of the whole exercise.