

red velvet cake

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Red Velvet Cake

A mildly chocolate buttermilk cake, dyed red, layered with cream cheese frosting. The colour began as an accident of chemistry — natural cocoa at low pH turns reddish-brown — and became a deliberate one when Adams Extract of Texas sold red dye alongside the recipe in the 1940s. The Waldorf-Astoria story is folklore.

It is worth being clear about what it tastes of: buttermilk and vanilla with a suggestion of cocoa. It is not a chocolate cake.

What makes it work

- **Vinegar and buttermilk against baking soda.** The acid–base reaction is the lift, and the low pH is what protects the red. This is the same chemistry as [devils food cake](#), run the other way.
- **Only 20 g of cocoa.** More and the brown swamps the red and the flavour stops being velvet.
- **Oil or butter, and it matters.** Oil gives the moister, softer crumb most American bakeries use; butter gives flavour. This recipe splits the difference.
- **Gel colour, not liquid.** Liquid food colouring at the volume needed thins the batter. Beet powder works as a natural alternative and fades in the oven — see [Beets](#).
- **Cream cheese frosting must be cold-butter cold.** Overbeaten or warm, it slumps. See [Cream Cheese Frosting](#).

Ingredients

Three 20 cm layers. Serves 14.

- 340 g all-purpose flour
- 20 g cocoa powder — see [Cocoa and cocoa mixes](#)
- 8 g baking soda
- 5 g fine salt
- 115 g unsalted butter, softened
- 180 ml neutral oil
- 400 g granulated sugar
- 3 [eggs](#)
- 240 ml buttermilk — see [buttermilk recipes](#)
- 2 tsp vanilla — see [Pure vanilla extract](#)
- 2 tbsp red gel food colouring
- 1 tbsp white vinegar

Frosting:

- 450 g full-fat cream cheese, cold
- 225 g unsalted butter, softened
- 500 g powdered sugar
- 2 tsp vanilla
- 3 g fine salt

Method

Heat the oven to **175 °C / 350 °F**. Butter and line three 20 cm tins.

Whisk the flour, cocoa, soda and salt.

Beat the butter, oil and sugar three minutes, then the eggs one at a time, then the vanilla and colouring.

Alternate the dry mixture with the buttermilk in three additions. Stir the vinegar in last — it will fizz faintly — and get the batter into the tins promptly.

Bake **24–28 minutes**, until a skewer shows moist crumbs. Cool completely.

For the frosting, beat the butter smooth, add the cold cream cheese and beat only until combined — 30 seconds. Add the sifted sugar, vanilla and salt and beat one minute more. Do not keep going; cream cheese loosens the longer it is worked.

Notes

- **Level the layers and save the scraps.** Blitzed with a spoonful of frosting and rolled, they are the standard red velvet cake pop.
- **Keeps four days refrigerated**, but serve at room temperature — cold cream cheese frosting is waxy.
- The unfrosted layers freeze for three months, wrapped tightly.

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