
Apple Cake Passport Project

Traveling around the world, one recipe at a time.

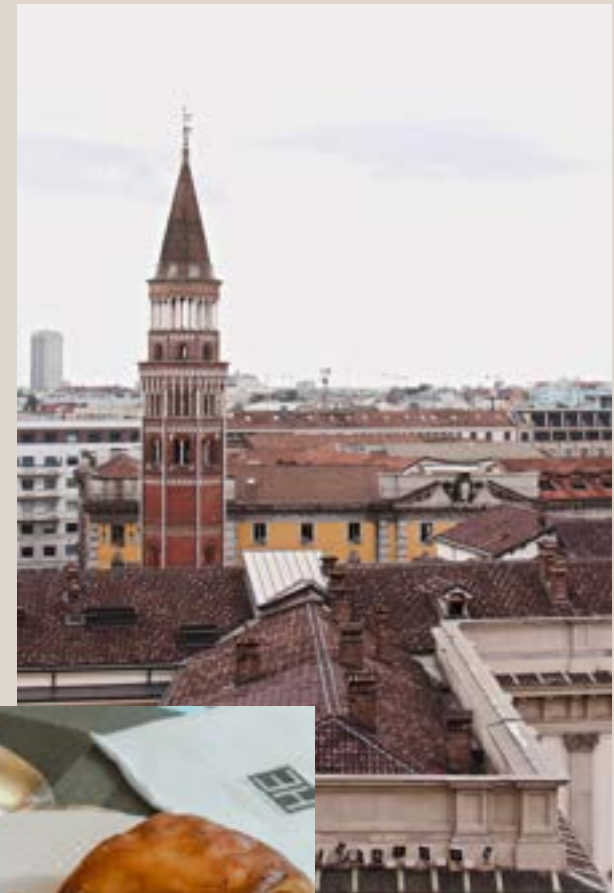
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WHERE IT BEGAN

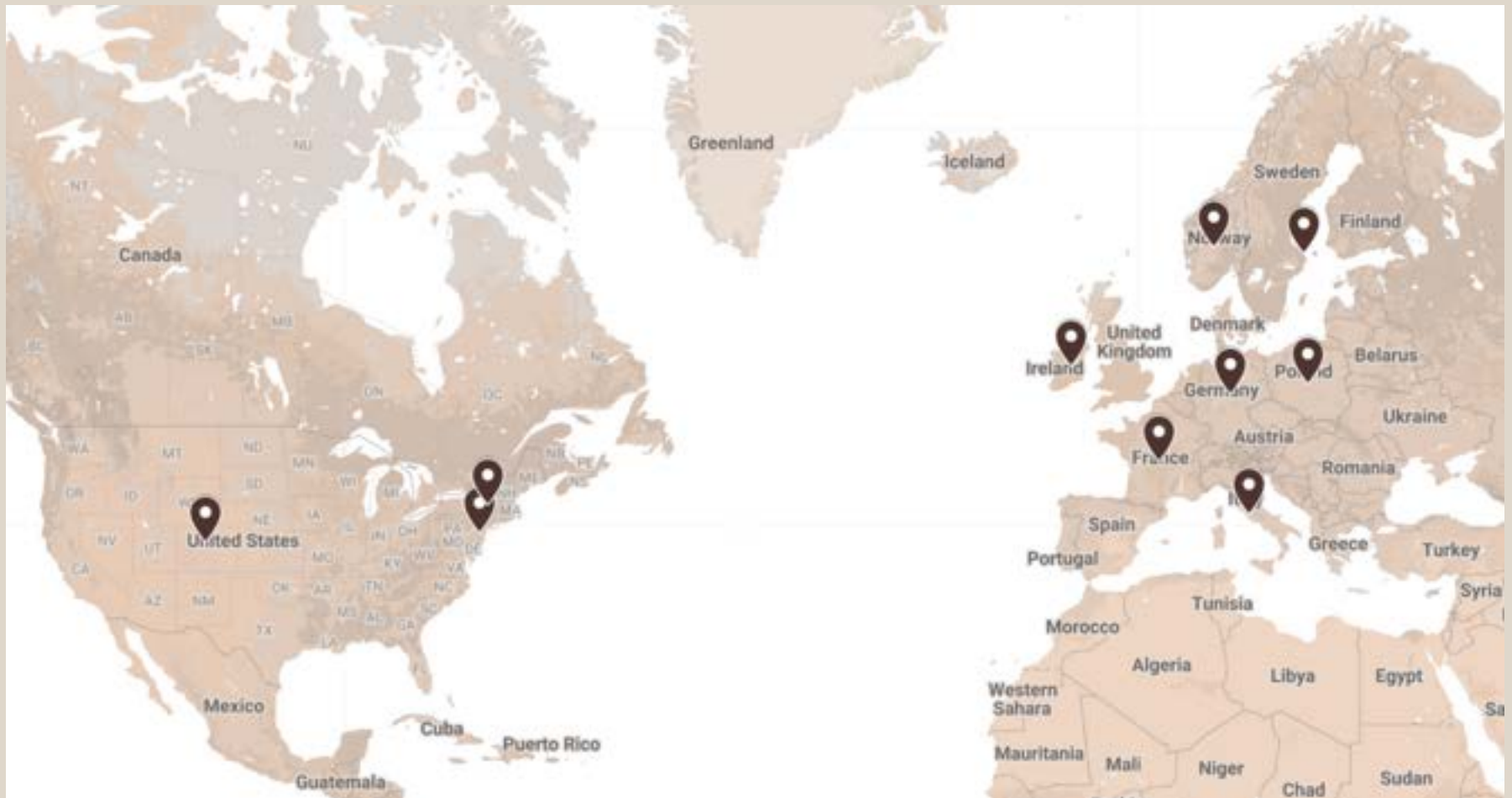
I have Royal Visconti Palace to thank for this rabbit hole I wandered down.

This project was born out of my failed attempt to get the recipe for an unassuming yet incredibly delicious apple cake from the hotel. In trying to find a similar recipe online and in various cookbooks (of which Dorie Greenspan's were particularly enjoyable), I discovered that apple cakes are enjoyed across myriad countries. Some are architecturally unexpected, like a shortcrust dough base and a streusel-like topping in the Polish Szarlotka, while others fit the bill for a traditional apple cake and share similar characteristics, like a high apple to batter ratio.

There are so many recipes and it was difficult to choose just one, so with the support of my taste testers, I began making as many as I could. Somewhere in the middle of this endeavor, I officially committed to this "project" and am here today to present the results!



RECIPE MAP



APPLE CAKE MATRIX





TORTA DI MELE

COUNTRY: ITALY

RECIPE: LAURA VITALE

RECIPE NOTES:

- Imprecise measurements due to the nature of an oral family tradition
- Contains limoncello



COMMENTS:

Laura Vitale was the very first YouTuber I subscribed to, and still today, she is my go-to, authoritative voice on Southern Italian cooking. Watching her videos transports me to a hot July evening in our old kitchen. I'm in the classic middle school outfit, a pair of gymnastic shorts and graphic t-shirt, bent over a pot of tomato sauce, thick and sweet, simmering gently, threatening to make a mess all over my summer school homework.

When I failed to get the apple cake recipe from the hotel, I looked to Laura for a recipe. By nature of an oral family tradition, this recipe's measurements may not be accurate. I opted out of adding limoncello, not only because I didn't have it, but because the batter's consistency already looked like Laura's nonna's, and I didn't want it to be too wet. Despite that, my resulting cake, though fully baked, looked wet and glossy, and had a spongy, springy texture occasionally disrupted by tunnels. Suffice to say, it looked quite different from Laura's nonna's, and I went back to the drawing board in search of another Italian apple cake recipe.

TUSCAN TORTA DI MELE

COUNTRY: ITALY

RECIPE: MARY ANN ESPOSITO

RECIPE NOTES:

- While most American bakers favor tart apples that hold their shape, Mary Ann recommends using Golden Delicious apples, a Tuscan favorite. Dorie Greenspan has also mentioned across her books that these are similar in flavor to varieties found in France.
- The batter is very thick and contains orange liquor.
- The original recipe calls for 2 1/4 cups of sugar. I used 1 cup and thought it could be further reduced to 3/4 cup.

COMMENTS:

Round II was more successful, especially texture-wise. Given the high amount of sugar in the batter, the outer crust caramelized and became crunchy while the interior stayed soft. This cake is perfumed with cinnamon and has a depth reminiscent of molasses and brown sugar (though neither were in the batter). If you don't have orange liquor, find another acidic substitute that will help brighten up the flavors, like limoncello, orange juice, or the squeeze of a lemon.

In making some European recipes, I've found that many use smaller sized apples. This recipe calls for 4, but I found that was too much and used 2 small Ginger Golds instead. Keep in mind that this also makes a lot of cake!



VERSUNKENER APFELKUCHEN

COUNTRY: GERMANY

RECIPE: [LUIISA WEISS](#)

RECIPE NOTES:

- Both butter and oil work
- The second time making this, I used 1/2 the amount of sugar and added a splash of almond extract for additional flavor.

COMMENTS:

I love the role cakes and other treats have in bringing people together. Luisa Weiss's *Classic German Baking* peaked my interest as a growing Germanophile in 2018, and this cake made its debut on my first day interning at Children's Specialized Hospital, which so happened to also be my mentor's birthday. This was the first of many celebrations that gathered different departments into our small research office over the summer, and it opened my eyes to the hand I could have in shaping my work culture.

For this recipe, apple slices are scattered on top of the cake and, in keeping with its name, "sink" as the dough bakes and puffs up around them. At the center, the crumb is tender, while the sides are slightly crispy. The cake has a light, floral taste I'd further enhance with additional lemon juice, lemon zest rubbed into the sugar before creaming, and honey or additional apricot preserves brushed as a glaze after baking.



YEASTED APFELKUCHEN

COUNTRY: GERMANY

RECIPE: [LUIISA WEISS](#)

RECIPE NOTES:

- The only apple cake recipe that relies on yeast for leavening
- The batter makes enough for a small, flat cake. [On Luisa's website](#), you'll see that her rendition looks even more like a bar or torte.

COMMENTS:

Yeast cakes are more common in Eastern Europe compared to the U.S. Despite the word "cake" in its name, this has a bread-like texture that makes it an excellent companion for your morning (or afternoon) coffee. Though it's denser than a typical cake, its texture is still light and plush.

This cake is simple and invites experimentation. On its own, it didn't shine very much for me. The small amount of sugar in this particular recipe didn't bump up the relatively plain flavor. Next time, I'd mix sliced apples into the cake in addition to fanning them across the surface. To play around further, I'd throw in some dried or fresh apricots, cherries, and plums, and generously sprinkle an almond-oat streusel on top.



KERRY APPLE CAKE

COUNTRY: IRELAND

RECIPE: [THE KITCHEN MCCABE](#)

RECIPE NOTES:

- Flavored with warm spices (cloves, nutmeg)
- Served with custard

COMMENTS:

This Irish treat shares a similar, bread-like texture with the German Yeasted Apfelkuchen, but that's where their similarities end. The Kerry Apple cake is moister, sweeter, and flavored with warm spices Americans associate with apple season. Straight out of the oven, you'll find that the crust tastes like a muffin top, slightly crisp and a good canvas to drizzle custard over.

This recipe makes for a hefty cake, so I recommend making this for sharing occasions. It holds up for a week and would benefit from being warmed through before re-serving. After daily servings over one week, taste fatigue developed! I'll have to wait for some time before revisiting this.



SZARLOTKA

COUNTRY: POLAND

RECIPE: DORIE GREENSPAN

RECIPE NOTES:

- Put your chef's hat on - the filling is endlessly riffable
- Analogue to the German Gedeckter Apfelkuchen, but the German filling is cooked further and has a top crust that makes it look more like a tall, English pie. Shares a name with the Russian Sharlotka, but the Russian recipe is in fact more similar to the French apple cake.

COMMENTS:

Pronounced "shar-lot-ka," this tart/pie is punctuated by dynamic textural and flavor contrasts. The shortcrust dough serves as both the base and topping. One may expect it to be crisp; instead, it's crumbly and dry like a shortbread cookie, which complements the juicy, tender apples, chewy dried cherries, and crunchy walnuts.

Never mind the confusion over cake vs. tart vs. pie. Flavor-wise, the Szarlotka will keep you coming back for more. The tartness of the apples and cherries brighten up the toasted nuts and buttery, rich crust. This was a family favorite that forks fought over. If by some miracle you have leftovers, you'll actually find that the crust absorbs some of the moisture from the apple filling, boosting flavor without rendering it soft or mushy.



SOCKERKAKA MED APPLEN

COUNTRY: SWEDEN

RECIPE: [DONAL SKEHAN](#)

RECIPE NOTES:

- What exactly is "a pinch?" I used a 1/2 tsp of salt.
- I used 100g of brown sugar and thought the level of sweetness was just right.
- Freshly ground cardamom is potent! 2 tsp may have been too much, and I recommend starting off with 1 tsp.

COMMENTS:

Whether this is a traditional Swedish recipe is debatable. The recipe author, Donal Skehan, is a warm-hearted YouTuber and food blogger from Ireland. I came across numerous Swedish apple cake recipes and wanted to select one that was trustworthy; considering how many Dorie Greenspan recipes were already on my list, I opted to diversify and went with Donal's.

When in need of something to accompany a winter afternoon tea, look no further than this scone-like cake. Neither light, springy, plush, nor dry, its dense crumb teetered between the Versunkener Apfelkuchen and Szarlotka on Day 1. Overnight, the edges softened slightly from the moisture of the apples. The cake became pound cake-like, but unfortunately, the new potential was dampened by soggy almonds. A cardamom fledgling, my dad did not embrace the "garlic" flavor added. If you're grinding your own cardamom, heed the recipe note!



EPLKAKE

COUNTRY: NORWAY

RECIPE: [NEVADA BERG](#)

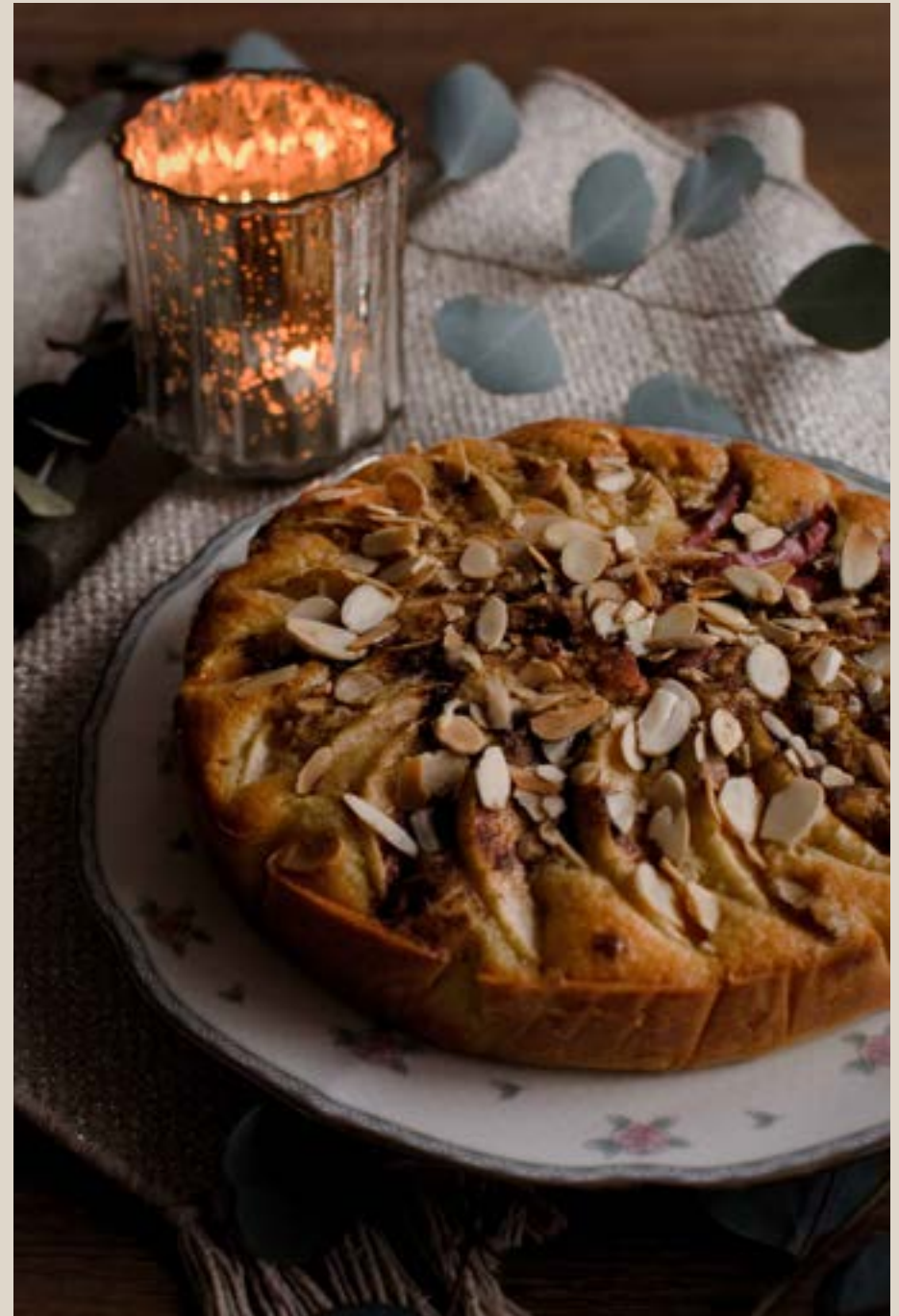
RECIPE NOTES:

- I used 1.5 medium-sized apples (not 4) and 200g of sugar (just sweet enough). I may consider adding vanilla and almond extract in the future.
- 40 minutes in the oven was perfect for me.
- Stores well!

COMMENTS:

This fan favorite merits a full-page image. With the even, tender, perfectly moist crumb, there's little to wonder why Nevada Berg's recipe has been well received on the internet. Plush but not spongy, moist but firm enough to retain a bite, this Eplekake shares the qualities of a good olive oil cake perfumed with the floral notes of an apple.

It looks good; it tastes good. This cake was nominated resoundingly as one of the best, and what's more official than the family taste test?



FRENCH APPLE CAKE

COUNTRY: FRANCE

RECIPE: DORIE GREENSPAN (ADAPTED BY [DAVID LEIBOVITZ](#))

RECIPE NOTES:

- Reminiscent of the Russian Sharlotka with its very high apple to batter ratio.
- I used 1.5 large apples (instead of 4).
- If you lack a springform pan like I do, an 8-inch cake pan works well.
- Keeps well, though the crackly, crisp top is only enjoyable fresh out of the oven.

COMMENTS:

Admittedly, I did not have high expectations for this simple cake, but I was pleasantly surprised by its depth of flavor. Since we didn't have rum, I reached for the warm, vanilla of cognac, which also conveniently made up for the vanilla extract I ran out of. 150 g of sugar, as called for by the recipe, was exactly what was needed to balance the sharpness of the cognac without overpowering the light, floral apple flavors. David Leibovitz recommended a dollop of crème fraiche to serve; I reached for the Icelandic skyr that's usually in my fridge and deemed it a worthy companion.

This cake is texturally engaging, too. 45 minutes of baking was just enough to achieve a light, crisp exterior with an interior so tender and plush it bordered on custard-like; I thank the large quantity of apples. The apples were tender but retained a slight al dente bite, and I opted to keep their skins on knowing they'd soften considerably and lend subtle flecks of color here and there. This cake is a testament to that which is wholly satisfying about simplicity. A no-fuss recipe that transforms simple ingredients into transcendence, this is one that has found a permanent stay in my repertoire.



LYNN'S APPLE CAKE

COUNTRY: USA

RECIPE: LYNN (ADAPTED BY NANCY)

(recipe available by request)

RECIPE NOTES:

- Apples are grated into the batter.

COMMENTS:

Though nearly 300 miles separate our feet, my dear friend, Nancy, and I have continued to grow our friendship over email. When I wrote to her about my apple cake project and asked for recommendations, she sent several recommendations, including a recipe from her friend Lynn, whom she met while living in NJ in 1970. While Nancy refers to this as Lynn's recipe, I wholeheartedly embrace the adaptations Nancy's made and will be calling it "Nancy's apple cake."

This fan-favorite is simple, wholesome, and delicious. I love that this is a relaxed cake and recipe – it's the afterschool snack I'd want to welcome my little ones home with, a treat to unveil when guests come over for coffee, and a satisfying snack when midnight cravings hit. It's more of a "snack cake" than a cake-cake, meaning no fancy occasion is required to enjoy it.

Grating the apples, though more laborious, is so worth it. The apples blend seamlessly into the cake and it cuts nicely (hello, pretty slices)! Don't skip the step of macerating the apples and squeezing the juices out. The residual juice is great to use in cocktails or to sip on as you wait for the cake to bake. Aside from the Szarlotka, other recipes have lacked textural contrast. The cinnamon-y, crunchy walnut topping is the perfect contrast to the pillow-soft cake. The cinnamon and brown sugar tip the flavor profile towards fall, but honestly, I'd enjoy this year round.



BAKED APPLE CIDER DOUGHNUTS

COUNTRY: USA

RECIPE: [TIEGHAN GERARD](#)

RECIPE NOTES:

- Triple the apple flavor from fresh apples, apple butter, and boiled down apple cider.

COMMENTS:

The texture of this baked doughnut is spongy, which is a considerable departure from the denser, pound cake-like bite I expect from cider doughnuts. But where this cake may fall short in texture, it makes up for in flavor. No other cake has as clear of an apple flavor as this!



DOUBLE APPLE BUNDT CAKE

COUNTRY: USA

RECIPE: [DORIE GREENSPAN](#)

RECIPE NOTES:

- Bundt cakes are large (anticipate a lot of ingredients for a lot of batter) and rich (from more sugar and butter).
- Contains apple butter

COMMENTS:

Most wonderful things in life are mini, and while I thought I had oiled my mini bundt pan well, nearly all of the cakes stuck. Instead of detailing the patchwork required to produce passable photos, I'll tell you about the texture, which was tender with a slight chew from all of the sugar (bundt pan = more surface area = more caramelization)! This reminded me of a lighter coffee cake, one step down from a dense pound cake.

Ironically, despite the double apple, there was no strong apple taste. It was mostly “sweet” with some brown sugar-y notes and hints of floral apple notes in the background. It's a good cake to look at, but not one that'll stay in my back pocket.



APPLE COCONUT FAMILY CAKE

COUNTRY: USA

RECIPE: [DORIE GREENSPAN](#)

RECIPE NOTES:

- This recipe includes yogurt, oil (no butter), coconut flakes (which I skipped), and almost 1/3 amount of sugar that Dorie's double apple bundt cake contains.

COMMENTS:

My love affair with all things mini is full of betrayal. This light cake didn't hold up to the chunks of chopped apple well, and in mini bundt cake form, structure was lacking. I recommend baking this in a normal 8x8 pan and grating the apples, an extra step with a good ROI as Lynne and Nancy's apple cake recipe taught me.

This cake is a wholesome breakfast or afternoon snack that my Bible study leader reportedly liked, but between you and me, I think they were being super nice. I'll grant points for being very light, moist, and not too sweet, but it didn't leave a particular impact.



Thank you
for making it
to the end!

Happy Baking!

hannahclaudia.blogspot.com