

What the Mug Cake Trend Says About Eating in 2019

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All of a sudden, mug cakes — those single-serving cakes mixed and cooked inside a mug — are everywhere. In the spring of 2017, Duncan Hines launched 18 flavors of mug cake mixes, including pineapple, apple cinnamon muffin, cookies and cream, and carrot cake. In May 2018, Starbucks stores began selling mug cake mixes alongside its coffee mugs. In September, Trader Joe's released a chocolate mug cake mix with salted caramels to be added midway through the cooking process, while Betty Crocker set the world record for the largest mosaic ever made with mug cakes (19,600 of them, to be exact). And in October, Milk Bar founder Christina Tosi released a book called *All About Cake*, featuring a recipe for an oatmeal-apple-brown sugar mug cake.

We've taken one of the most iconic foods that traditionally brings people together — whether to celebrate a birthday, a wedding, or just a random get-together — and turned it into a single-serving item to enjoy quickly and often alone. What's the deal with these little cakes, and why won't they go away?

Some mug cake recipes involve most of the steps needed to make a real, normal-sized cake, just on a smaller scale: mix flour, sugar, oil, vanilla, salt, etc. (There's a debate among mug

cake enthusiasts about whether or not an egg makes the tiny cakes too sticky.) The difference between a traditional cake and a mug cake is that to make the latter, ingredients are combined all in one mug, which prevents the baker from making a mess, having to wash numerous dishes, or even from needing an actual kitchen. The main selling point of these tiny treats is that they're "baked" in a microwave for as little as one minute, instead of the unbearable 30 minutes to an hour that typical cakes require in a traditional oven.

While the origin of the mug cake is difficult to trace, one of the [earliest video tutorials](#) surfaced on YouTube in 2009. The woman in the video received an email from her neighbor with the subject line "The most dangerous cake in the world." She films the mixing of ingredients together (she doesn't trust this whole mug concept at first, so she takes out another bowl and mixes everything together before pouring the batter into the mug itself) and at the end, conducts a taste-test with her son in which she concludes that this cake recipe really is as "dangerous" as the email cautioned — dangerous because no matter the time of day or night, a moist cake could be at the ready in less than five minutes.

"Examining the mug cake's popularity is like holding a mirror up to society's relationship with food"

At first, it seems difficult to take the mug cake seriously: a harmless, almost laughable dessert. They give off the cooking-for-one-is-lonely vibe, attempting to fend it off with bright cake mix packages and vlogs with upbeat background music. Instead of an Instagram-ready plate of sliced cake with beautiful, delicate layers, they're slightly sunken masses swaddled in a mug, best eaten with a spoon. But examining the mug cake's popularity more closely is like holding a mirror up to society's relationship with food over the past decade.

When it comes to modern-day priorities around food, efficiency is key. "With more time starvation in our lives, consumers have been adapting their eating behavior," says Shelley Balanko, PhD and senior vice president of business development at the Hartman Group, a food and beverage consultancy firm. "So rather than living life like we used to, say 30 years ago, where we organized our life around eating, eating is now fitting into our lives."

For a full-time mom who needs a sweet at the end of the day or an anxious student craving a late-night snack, the beauty of the mug cake is that it can be created quickly almost anywhere, as long as that anywhere has a microwave. "We're definitely a 'gotta have it now' culture," says Leslie Bilderback, author of [Mug Cakes: 100 Speedy Microwave Treats to Satisfy Your Sweet Tooth](#).

Many people simply lack the time to go through all the steps of baking an actual cake, and often, the single serving that a mug cake offers is all that's needed. As people prioritize work and other activities over social eating, [more meals are now eaten alone than ever before](#). In recent years it's become more culturally acceptable to cook for one, to eat while hunched over a laptop screen or watching Netflix. According to Anita Lo, chef and author of [Solo, Eater's 2018 cookbook of the year](#), dining alone can be empowering: "There's something satisfying about actually putting together a meal [for yourself]," she says, even if that simply means following her book's recipe for an orange olive oil mug cake.

And while the rise of health and wellness culture may seem to threaten the popularity of the mug cake, single-serve food items also enable portion control. *The Guardian* explains that “Up until the age of three or four, children have an enviable ability to stop eating when they are full. After that age, this self-regulation of hunger is lost, and sometimes never relearned.” Our plates have grown bigger, our eyes have grown bigger, and so have our stomachs. It’s extremely difficult to say no to food when it’s placed in front of you; this explains why sometimes when you bake a regular-sized cake, half of it disappears in the blink of an eye.

But the mug cake’s size isn’t its only redeeming factor when it comes to fitting in with the wellness craze: Where social eating is often filled with pressure – to order a drink if everyone else is, or to eat dessert if the table orders it – eating alone alleviates these outside influences. “We’re thinking of ourselves and our needs as much more idiosyncratic,” Balanko says. “And we’re taking a much more individualized way of eating to address these goals.”

Concepts like “me time” and “self-care” have snaked their way into everyday conversations and accrued countless hashtags on social media, and many people view pampering themselves, whether it’s with a sweet treat or a spa day, as an integral part of their self-care routine. Inventions like the mug cake give people the ability to have exactly what they want, when they want it. And the process of cooking itself can be “a form of self-care, whether you’re making something really healthy or something that’s a little bit more indulgent,” Lo says. The rise in dedication to self-care and wellness didn’t stomp out the mug cake, but rather gave it a space to thrive.

So even if mug cakes began as a fun idea, their persistence is uncharacteristic. They were supposed to be cute for a little while and then die off like other trends – yet here we are in 2019 with mug cakes taking up more shelf space than ever before. Brands have caught on and are giving us what we want – but what if what we want isn’t exactly what we need?

Cake still symbolizes celebration and brings joy, whether served by slice or by mug. The quick, customizable, easy mug cake is a paradox, though: It represents the freedom to indulge on your own terms, but consequently lacks the community and connection that real cakes offer. The mug cake is small, but the societal changes that made it popular are huge. Perhaps it really is just as dangerous as that friendly neighbor’s email warned.

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