

Chocolate-Peanut Butter Pretzel Layer Cake

My very favorite desserts are a combination of sweet and salty. Throwing chocolate in the mix? That's just perfection. This cake is a combination of tender chocolate cake, creamy peanut butter frosting, and crunchy pretzel bits. Big bites of chocolate meet little flecks of salt. There's really nothing more I need from life.

Start with Basic Three-Layer Chocolate Cake (page 186), 1 cup coarsely crushed pretzels, 4 ounces 60% cacao dark chocolate, coarsely chopped, and a few handfuls of whole mini pretzel twists. Frost the cake with Salted Peanut Butter Buttercream Frosting (recipe follows), adding a handful of the crushed pretzels and the chocolate pieces between each layer. Gently press the remaining crushed pretzels and chocolate pieces into the sides of the cake, and decorate the top with the whole pretzel twists.

Basic Three-Layer Chocolate Cake

3 cups cake flour
¾ cup unsweetened natural cocoa powder
2 teaspoons baking powder
1½ teaspoons baking soda
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon instant espresso powder (optional)
1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature
1½ cups packed light brown sugar
1½ cups granulated sugar
4 large eggs, at room temperature
1 tablespoon pure vanilla extract
2 cups buttermilk

1. Put oven racks in the center and upper third of the oven and preheat the oven to 350°F. Grease and flour three 9-inch round baking pans.
2. In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, cocoa powder, baking powder, baking soda, salt, and instant espresso powder, if using.
3. In the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, beat the butter and sugars together on medium speed until light and fluffy, 3 to 4 minutes. Add the eggs, one at a time, beating for 1 minute after each addition. Beat in the vanilla extract. Reduce the mixer speed to low, add half of the flour mixture, and beat until the flour mixture is incorporated. Add the buttermilk in a slow stream and beat until thoroughly combined. Add the remaining flour mixture and beat until just combined. Remove the bowl from the mixer and finish stirring with a spatula. Divide the batter among the 3 prepared cake pans.

4. Bake until golden brown on top and a wooden pick inserted in the center comes out clean, 20 to 25 minutes. Let cool in the pans for 20 minutes before inverting onto wire racks to cool completely before frosting.

5. If you're not frosting the cake right away, double-wrap in plastic wrap and store in the freezer. Cake layers will stay freshest for up to 7 days in the freezer. When ready to frost, remove from the freezer, unwrap, and frost frozen!

Makes one 3-layer 9-inch cake

Salted Peanut Butter Buttercream Frosting

2 cups (4 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature

1½ cups smooth all-natural peanut butter

½ teaspoon salt

1 tablespoon pure vanilla extract

6 to 7 cups confectioners' sugar

3 to 4 tablespoons heavy cream

In the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, beat the butter on medium speed until softened, about 1 minute. Add the peanut butter, salt, and vanilla extract and beat well. Add 2 cups of the confectioners' sugar and beat until well combined. Add another 2 cups of sugar along with 3 tablespoons of heavy cream. Add the remaining 2 to 3 cups of sugar and remaining cream and beat until it is your desired thickness. Beat on medium speed until the frosting is smooth and fluffy, about 4 minutes.

Makes about 4 1/2 cups