

MY FAMILY RECIPE

## After I Survived Cancer, I Celebrated With a Birthday Cake

by: CAROLINE WRIGHT

July 31, 2018 | 49 Comments

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49 COMMENTS



**G**ood food is worth a thousand words—sometimes more. In *My Family Recipe*, a writer shares the story of a single dish that's meaningful to them and their loved ones.



PHOTO BY DANIE DRANKWALTER

cake, the flavors catered to their preference. Around mid-September, I disappear into a cloud of flour for a few days.

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Luckily, I think of baking cakes—especially ones meant to celebrate birthdays—as an honor. They inspire gathering together out of love to eat something made with love. They display the power of a person’s life through community and celebrate the precious gift of age.

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I think about birthdays a lot now, but not just because of the cake. About a year ago, I was diagnosed with the most aggressive form of brain cancer—a *glioblastoma multiforme*—and was given a year to live. It was the biggest bully on the brain cancer block, the end of the line of the tumors that my consulting surgeon told me not to scroll to when looking at the ABTA website. There I was, diagnosed with the “impossible.”

## Join The Conversation

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“As someone who underwent cancer surgery early this year, I very much understand the cycle of doubt and fear, followed by positivity (I was unable at first to read through the article, but I’m so glad I finally did). I especially appreciate your courage and honesty. Beautiful article. Thank you. Wishing you many, many happy years of health and happiness with your family, and success...

— creamtea

COMMENT

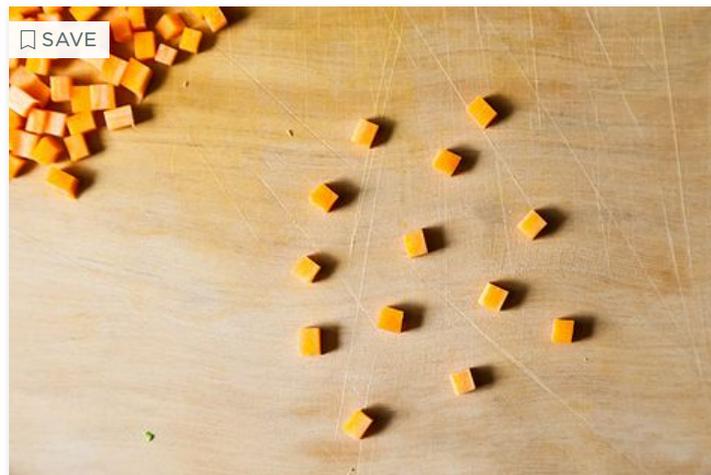
My case has been very unusual from the start, like the fact that it was discovered just a few weeks before my 33rd birthday, about 30 years early according to the statistics. When the doctors first looked at the MRI that showed the tangerine-sized intruder, based on where it had grown, they were surprised I could walk—let alone cook, drive, or write my third cookbook, all of which I had done during its growth—and feared that I would lose any variety of motor skills after its removal. I never did, thankfully, and went home straight from the ICU after just an overnight stay in the hospital.

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Of course, I cried at first. A lot. I spent a few days in bed writing goodbye letters, feeling guilty when I heard my boys' footsteps outside my door, aching to be with them as they grew and expecting I wouldn't. The younger of my sons wouldn't remember me if I died when they warned I might, and the older was constantly bargaining for wishes in unexpected places with an unspoken power. He would blow apart every dandelion he found, whisper to himself before breaking a wishbone. He didn't have to tell me what he wished for.

Soon after my diagnosis I realized: If I had a year to live, and I was facing the possibility of dying in front of my kids, did I want them to remember me as infirm and weak? Or did I want them to remember me baking while dancing to music? That got me out of bed and back into the kitchen.

The foods I chose to cook for myself were entirely different than those in my regular rotation. A month after my diagnosis, I decided to opt for a new, anti-inflammatory way of eating that cut out great sources of comfort (and years of my work), like chocolate, gluten, and sugar. I had been examining every possible lifestyle choice for opportunities to live more gently, to give

my body all the strength it could possibly wield behind the tools my doctors were giving me. It felt like a starting point to figure out how to fight my cancer.

“

*I think of baking cakes—especially ones meant to celebrate birthdays—as an honor. They display the power of a person’s life through community and celebrate the precious gift of age.*

”

In addition to changing my diet, I decided to engage the “emergency plan” that my agent and I had discussed, and handed off the finishing touches of my third book—my dream project, one I had traveled to Spain and left my younger son as a baby to write—to a ghost writer, to a stranger. It’s a decision I still wrestle with today, despite knowing that it was one of the ways I was able to create space in my life for healing. [It comes out in September](#) and I look forward to seeing it, as hopefully you will. It’s the last memento of what now feels like a former life.

I was thrown into an aggressive treatment plan of radiation and chemotherapy soon after, but never found the symptoms the doctors cautioned me about. I was lucky enough to feel well—so much better than before my surgery, in fact—and my steady activity of cooking and writing helped me to recognize myself in this new brain. I honestly didn’t feel like I was dying until I looked at the faces of my friends, and they cried as I smiled and hugged them hello. I would think, “I’m a baker; I give cookies to people to make them happy.” Having friends cry at you is the inverse of whatever one would call that “baker’s instinct.” It hollowed out a part of me that I had to fill with hope I had constructed for myself, since none of my doctors were able to lend me any at the time.

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**Just two days after finding the tumor, I started a CaringBridge blog to disperse my news to far-flung family and friends.** Also, so I didn’t have to spend my energy and time retelling the worst parts of my days when I wanted instead to be reading books to my kids. As I wrote, I imagined pulling the posts together for a book that I would leave my boys, a place to leave my voice for them in case I wasn’t around. Some people thought that writing a memoir was defeatist or pessimistic—it wasn’t for me. It was being a mom, planning for the worst and being realistic about what my circumstances were and hoping that my plans would be sufficient to care for my boys as they grew. It was creating beauty and love through words. It made me immortal in a way—here, for the first time, was a place untouchable by cancer, one that echoed the kind of empowerment I was finding in the kitchen. The comforts of cooking were so similar to writing: Stringing together a sentence, a paragraph, a great story, was like the layering of ingredients, both creations within my control when so little was.





My 34th birthday cake. | PHOTO BY BOBBI LIN

I also baked as a form of meditation, like the yoga I found myself in three times a week. I'm an instinctual baker, recognizing the feel of a batter or the crumble of a dough, which is helpful because I had to befriend an entirely new pantry of ingredients that defied my classic culinary training. I went to work on developing a cake recipe that I hoped to use for my next birthday, as if I could create hope with my hands. Baking is proof that the combination of disparate things, when working together in the right amounts, make something altogether new. I have come to think of the concept of health in regard to lifestyle somewhat the same way.

I liked the idea of fighting cancer through baking, of feeling like a warrior wrapped in my dad's old apron. They are so diametrically opposed: Cancer is enigmatic, unpredictable, and evokes fear with the mention of its name. It's isolation and death.

But baking is love. Done well, baking is effort and care that manifests into the creation of edible beauty. It's community and the celebration of life. Pairing the two feels like a quintessential battle between good versus evil, but one that ends in crumbs rather than surgery.

“  
*I liked the idea of fighting cancer through baking, of feeling like a warrior wrapped in my dad's old apron.*  
”

Baking a birthday cake for myself was incredibly empowering. It held the possibility of celebrating another year, one I wasn't supposed to have. It held honesty for what I'd been through, lacking chocolate, but an acceptance for what is, through the consolation of carob. It held my creativity and resilience, making a thing that resembles cakes I'd eaten my whole life from ingredients I had only just met. The elements surrounding the cake, however, were the ones that felt most powerful: my family and the life I live with them every day I am able. I'm humbled by the very idea of making this cake again.

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**Today, I live with clean scans in the time frame I was told would be my end.** I made this cake to celebrate my 34th birthday. In this uncharted territory beyond statistics, the shape of my new, healthy life emerges, and I cook and bake to celebrate all of it. I've returned to [my food blog](#) after about eight years of its dormancy. I once used that space years ago to find my voice as a cook and writer, and return to it now for the same reasons, my inspiration reborn through new ingredients and challenges. It's where I celebrate the foods I eat rather than apologize for what they replace, which had been my deepest fear as a food writer facing the handicap of a restricted diet. Writing there helps me feel less like a musician with hearing loss, and more like one who is just finding a new way to play her favorite songs.

Baking and dancing around in the kitchen last year, as it turned out, gave me more than recipes—it gave me life. My doctors speak in years now rather than months. On my last birthday, my youngest son sat in my lap to help with my candles and my oldest over my shoulder, all of us perched in front of a cake I made with love for myself, full of hope and gratitude. Our wishes

were the same, as we watched the tendrils of smoke twist from the charred wick, granted in that very moment and all the ones since.

SAVE



## Caroline's Birthday Cake

[View Recipe](#)

### INGREDIENTS

#### *For The Cake*

- Room temperature butter or vegetable shortening, for greasing pans
- 2 cups cups all-purpose gluten-free flour, homemade or store-bought, plus more for pans
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 cup unsweetened applesauce, at room temperature
- 1/4 cup liquid honey
- 4 large eggs, at room temperature
- 1/4 cup melted coconut oil or butter
- 1/2 cup apple juice concentrate, thawed and at room temperature
- 1 recipe carob frosting, follows

#### *For The Frosting*

- 2 cups ground carob, toasted preferred
- 1 1/2 cups melted coconut oil
- 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt

- 2 pinches ground cinnamon
- 1 cup almond butter, raw preferred
- 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract



## Join the Conversation

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WRITTEN BY:

### Caroline Wright

Before her diagnosis, Caroline wrote a book on cakes called *Cake Magic!*. She started developing a birthday cake using her gluten-free mix found in that book. Check out other recipes she's developing for her new life—and the stories behind them—on her blog, *The Wright Recipes*. Her next book, *Catalan Food*, written with chef Daniel Olivella, comes out in early September from Clarkson Potter.

  [carolinewrightbooks.com](http://carolinewrightbooks.com)

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jackie D. December 13, 2018

You are certainly a gutsy, firey gal! My compliments on forever holding the reins on that animal. I wish you all the best from my heart.

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Karen October 14, 2018

I don't cook or bake, so how I ended up reading your story is another mystery. Somehow a tomato basil soup recipe led me here & I happened upon you!

I'm currently in chemo for a recurrence of cancer initially occurring 4 years ago. This time my body is tolerating the same protocol/drugs, with significant side effects. Out of 3 sessions 21 days apart, I ended up in the ER twice due to extreme nausea/excruciating headaches & dehydration. Cancer stinks, as we all know, but I don't need to be exposed to others in an ER!

For some reason yesterday, I became emotional & panicky, overcome with fear. Afterward, I reminded myself that positivity is key and I needed to adjust my attitude. So I woke up today, reminding myself of my blessings.

Please share any suggestions for healthy meals for your fellow travelers on this path. I know I need to force water (yuck!), reduce sugar to a minimum and avoid inflammation (however you do that!). Have an insta-pot, never been used.

Suggestions welcomed and wishes of peace & good health!

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◆ AUTHOR COMMENT ◆



**Caroline W.** January 18, 2019

Hi Karen, I am so sorry that you are in the thick of your treatment. It is the piece of the cancer puzzle that really highlights a betrayal of this body you've known your whole life. During mine, I always tried to find the ways that my body was being strong-- isn't it amazing? That we can poison it, radiate it, and it still functions? Walks, getting out in nature, really helped me, too.

It sounds like you're looking to make some big changes. Feel free to email me and/or follow along on my blog, The Wright Recipes, where I share my recipes that suit my anti-inflammatory, grain-free, refined sugar-free diet as well as my family.

I believe there is a lot of life lived beyond the statistics they tell you. I hope you do, too. xo

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**Bob P.** October 5, 2018

You have elegantly expressed what I can not. "Speaking in terms of months" touched a nerve. Thank you for your incite.

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**Amanda T.** August 29, 2018

You are an amazing & courageous woman, Caroline. Thank you for sharing your beautifully written story. I am sending you prayers for continued strength and good health.

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◆ AUTHOR COMMENT ◆



**Caroline W.** January 18, 2019

Thank you, Amanda. It all helps, I truly believe that.

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**leanneskitchen** August 27, 2018

Your essay confirmed that what I did today made sense. I found out on Friday that my friend and co-worker had lost her brother on Wed. Not knowing how to bring her comfort, one of my thoughts was to make her muffins. Muffins, does that make any sense?

In times of uncertainty, it's good to turn to something you love and can share with others.

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◆ AUTHOR COMMENT ◆



**Caroline W.** January 18, 2019

Food is a graceful way to show support and sympathy without inserting yourself, I've experienced. Traumatic times (like death) in a family are practically so very busy and so very stressful that food gifts are very, very appreciated.

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**Herself** August 26, 2018

Thank you for this article. The cancer lexicon speaks of those who are survivors, but I think we need a new phrase: endurers. I live with a cancer which is labeled incurable, but I much prefer to describe it as cancer for which there is not yet a cure. There are great changes afoot. I was given four years as a likelihood for remission and here I stand at 12 years and a few months. Which is a whole lot of time when you are counting it in small measurements. My 9 year old is 21. After all the treatments, I collected milestones with joy: when I could walk around the block, when I could climb the stairs in one go, when I could taste a glass of wine and best of all, when I could make dinner to feed my family who had stood so steadfast by my side.

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**Liz W.** November 23, 2018

What a wonderful example of gratitude. persevered in spite of.

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**annette** December 17, 2018

Just found this and had to reply because my 9 year old is now 21, too! It is thrilling. I was due to die of my own incurable (I like your not-yet-curable) cancer within five years, but I so longed to stay around to raise my girl. The cancer returned three times and each year that I was literally knocked flat by the surgery/chemo combo, I most missed cooking in my own kitchen. When I was first told about the impending death part, I decided (after a few days' shock) that I'd better enjoy my days, as they were all I had. Some lucky how, they have stretched into years. I just celebrated my eleventh improbable birthday, and my daughter is ready to graduate from college in May; I never expected to live to see her out of high school. So happy for all my fellow cancer veterans on here, (though I still daren't tempt fate with the word survivor.)

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**Caroline W.** January 18, 2019

Thank you for sharing the beauty you see because of your cancer. It is there, I know it well, too. I am happy to hear that the feeling of simple gratitudes toward your everyday life never go away.

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**Lisa** August 6, 2018

I too am a cancer survivor coming up on 5 years. Mine was a common cancer in an uncommon place so much so that there were no studies to base treatment on. So I "won" the treatment trifecta-surgery, chemo and radiation. Such an adventure! At the end my treatment was successful only to reveal an unrelated tumor lurking in my head of an even rarer variety. I declined the opportunity to aggressively attack it as I am without symptoms. So we live ours lives on a precipice trying to live with value instead of waiting to die. I've also started to eat much healthier and so look forward to trying your cake. Thank you.

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**Caroline W.** August 6, 2018

Lisa, what a story! I feel like as kids we are taught to feel that doctors know everything -- they will fix your flu, etc-- so, when I got so very sick I assumed they would proportionately know even more and provide even more comfort. I think the scale is actually reversed-- the sicker you are, the less they know, and the more comfort has to come from inside. It's so very frustrating. I am grateful that my cake might provide you some comfort!

Forget statistics. They're about other people, not ::you::.

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**Lisa** August 6, 2018

I plan to try this for my 60th birthday. (Or maybe before that.) I can hardly wait. And kudos to you for opening yourself up about your health adventure. I wish you all the best.

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**Annada R.** August 6, 2018

Congratulations on your exit out of the "C" universe! Thank you for sharing your story with us. May it inspire all of us to rely on our passion even in the midst of adversity!

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◆ AUTHOR COMMENT ◆



**Caroline W.** August 6, 2018

Thanks! I haven't exited the woods yet, just learning to enjoy the hike. xo

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**creamtea** August 6, 2018

Thank you for sharing this. As someone who underwent cancer surgery early this year, I very much understand the cycle of doubt and fear, followed by positivity (I was unable at first to read through the article, but I'm so glad I finally did). I especially appreciate your courage and honesty. Beautiful article. Thank you. Wishing you many, many happy years of health and happiness with your family, and success with your forthcoming book on Catalan cooking!

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**Caroline W.** August 6, 2018

Thanks, Lisanne! Wishing you luck, too. Get in touch if I can help.

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**lastnightsdinner** August 3, 2018

Remarkable. Thank you for sharing this. Here's to your continued good health!

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◆ AUTHOR COMMENT ◆

 **Caroline W.** August 6, 2018

Thank you!

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 **Kristen M.** August 1, 2018

Caroline, thank you so much for this powerful, gorgeously written story, and for choosing to share it with us. You are an inspiration—I'm in awe of how you navigated the worst news in the bravest way.

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 **Caroline W.** August 6, 2018

The honor is mine to share here, among this beautiful community you've helped to build. Thanks, Kristen. xo

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 **Dayna** August 1, 2018

Such an amazing and empowering story! I moped then searched for healthy recipes after cancer. Forgetting the biggest thing that you've just pointed out - to celebrate life and our people in it.

Wishing you many more happy birthdays and the cakes that go with them!

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◆ AUTHOR COMMENT ◆

 **Caroline W.** August 6, 2018

The moping is real! Cooking, for me, is the antidote. There are delicious foods for every diet, especially if you are willing to look for them. Thank you for reading. xo

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 **Wynne** August 1, 2018

What an inspiring story! May you celebrate many, many more birthdays with your "new" version of healthy cake recipes. Perhaps we all need to re-think our ideas about "comfort" food. It is certainly comforting to know you are eating healthily.

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 **Casey** August 1, 2018

So happy for you to have another birthday to celebrate! Caleb Magic cakes are in regular rotation at our house - can't wait to add your birthday cake to our list!

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 **Casey** August 1, 2018

\*\*Cake Magic!!!

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**Caroline W.** August 6, 2018

I'm so happy you bake from Cake Magic! I love that book so much. I'd love to hear your favorite!

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**Bevi** August 1, 2018

Such an inspiring message. Thank you for sharing this, and I hope you celebrate many more birthdays.

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**Caroline W.** August 6, 2018

Thanks, Bevi. I so appreciate your kind words and your reading mine here.

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**boulangere** August 1, 2018

Brava!

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**Caroline W.** August 6, 2018

Grazie! Thanks for reading!

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**Eric K.** July 31, 2018

My cousin and I couldn't stop crying at the pool after reading this. Thank you for choosing us for this story, Caroline.

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◆ AUTHOR COMMENT ◆



**Caroline W.** August 6, 2018

xo my pleasure.

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**louisez** July 31, 2018

Sending you my best wishes for many more birthday cakes (and recipes for them I hope you'll share).

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**Caroline W.** August 6, 2018

Thank you! I will! xo

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**drbabs** July 31, 2018

Wishing you continued healing and good health for a long long time.

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**Caroline W.** August 6, 2018

Thank you. That is the whisper deep inside I wake up to every day. xo

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**Mckenzie** July 31, 2018

Thank you so much for sharing, Caroline. As someone who has walked with a dear friend through breast (and then brain) cancer, you beautifully put words to the emotions I remember we all felt during that time.

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**Caroline W.** August 6, 2018

It's terrifying. Your friend was lucky to have you alongside their journey.

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