

Banana Polenta Upside Down Cake

Simple to make, and not too sweet, this make-ahead vanilla banana cake is perfect for dessert or brunch.

GF OPTION SERVES 8			
unsalted butter	¼ cup	60 g	2 oz
brown sugar, packed	½ cup	115 g	4 oz
vanilla pods, split and scraped	2		
lime, zest of	1		
lime juice	2 Tbsp	30 ml	1 fl oz
dark rum (optional)	1 Tbsp	15 ml	½ fl oz
bananas, large, ripe with green tips	4	450 g	1 lb
plain or gluten-free flour	⅓ cup	50 g	1¾ oz
polenta, medium grind	1 cup	160 g	5½ oz
baking powder*	¼ tsp		
sea salt	¼ tsp		
eggs, large, separated	3		
superfine sugar	⅓ cup	75 g	2½ oz
pure vanilla extract	½ tsp		
skim or soy milk	¼ fl cup + 2 Tbsp	90 ml	3 fl oz
corn or vegetable oil	¼ fl cup	60 ml	2 fl oz

* Most baking powders are gluten free, but check label to be sure.

My most fragrant vanilla memory is quite recent. Returning from the Heilala plantation party in Tonga, our group leaned on luggage carts by the baggage carousel while the contraband-sniffing beagles wound in and out of the array of passengers. Suddenly, in unison, all eyes and noses turned towards two brown boxes emerging from behind the rubber flap of the carousel curtain. The beagles strained on their leads to get closer as Jennifer and Garth Boggiss, our Tongan hosts, lifted the boxes and went over to the inspection tables. The scent of hundreds of perfectly cured vanilla beans wafted through airport arrivals and except for the dogs, all who sniffed the air were smiling.

Line a 9-inch/ 20-cm cake or pie pan with foil and butter the foil. Set aside. Preheat oven to 350°F/180°C.

Melt butter in a frying pan over medium-low heat. Add brown sugar and stir with a heat-resistant or wooden spatula until the mixture begins to bubble. Add vanilla seeds and pods stirring well for 1 minute. Add lime zest, juice and rum—the mixture will sizzle—and stir until blended. Remove from heat and pour sugar glaze into prepared cake pan with vanilla pods.

Arrange pods in center of cake pan. Peel, then slice bananas lengthwise into ¼-in/½-cm thick slices. Carefully place in a single layer and drizzle with any remaining glaze. Set aside.

Whisk the flour, polenta, baking powder and salt in a small bowl.

In a large grease-free bowl, and using a hand-mixer or stand-mixer, whisk the egg whites until frothy. Slowly stream in half the sugar and whip the whites to glossy, soft peaks, tripled in volume.

In a small bowl, whisk the yolks with remaining sugar until well blended. Add the vanilla, milk and oil, whisking well.

Fold dry ingredients into yolks, using a spatula to combine. Fold in the whites in 3 stages until just blended. Gently pour or spoon batter on top of banana mixture, smoothing the top. Place in center of oven and bake for 23–25 minutes until cake is set and springs back when touched in center.

Cool for 10 minutes then invert onto a serving plate, carefully peeling foil off the top. Serve warmed or at room temperature with a spoonful of Greek yogurt or ice cream. **NM**