

Bake in My Body

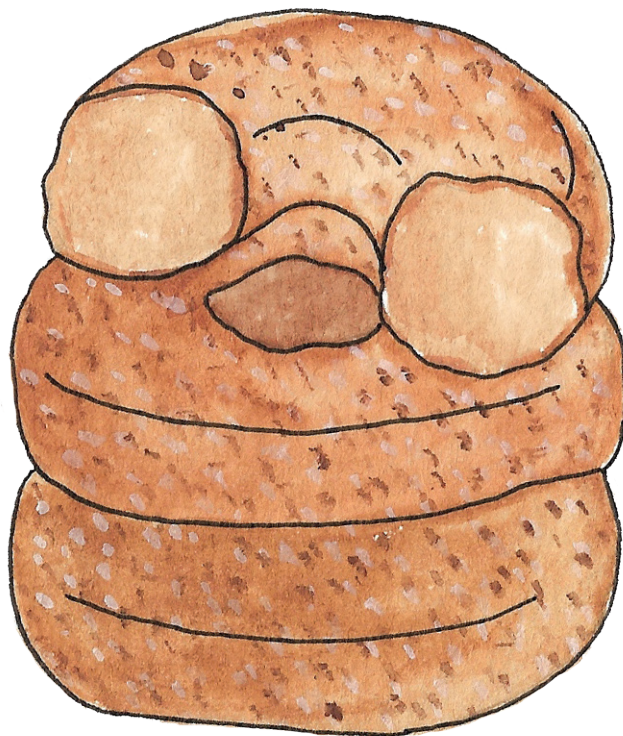
How a Career in Professional Baking Is Helping Me Recover from an Eating Disorder

by Justine Lee

My grandmother used to pick me up from preschool every day with either a crisp bag of freshly baked cinnamon sugar doughnuts or the determination to venture to a bakery to make our selections together. My mom and I made The Barefoot Contessa's coconut cake together when I was seven; I distinctly remember being so overwhelmed with its incredible flavor that I actually shed a tear. These matriarchs instilled in me a deep love of baked goods. I wonder how they felt when the young girl they raised could barely take two small bites of her own birthday cake.

Ever since I was young, baking was my primary way of celebrating the simple yet golden moments of life, from birthdays to Friday movie nights. It was also a way of demonstrating my deep affection for the people around me, a means by which I could connect with them despite my introverted adolescent demeanor. In the kitchen, I felt a lightness and freedom to be myself. I wish I had held onto these sensations during my darkest hours.

My first job was as a baker and barista at a small local patisserie in Connecticut. In the process of whipping up drinks and putting the finishing touches on pastries, I fell in love with the scrappy nature of being on my feet and crafting products by hand. Upon packing



my life up and moving to New York City, I eventually started working at a startup assisting in operations and quality assurance. But last autumn, an opportunity to be a baker opened up at Levain, the esteemed NYC bakery. And so, I took a huge chance and swapped my laptop for clogs and an apron to make my return to baking.

It had been a while since I'd worked in a professional bakery setting so admittedly, I was rusty. Yet I wasn't that nervous. I believed that my familiarity and adoration for baking and working with food would serve me well. Nor was I intimidated by the early dawn hours and physical demands tied to it. What I did fear was if I could survive the job as a person recovering from an eating disorder.

The decision to pivot into baking full-time coincided with the four-month mark of my recovery journey from a two-year battle with anorexia, orthorexia, and a complete collapse into a series of unsustainable, all-consuming behaviors in the name of achieving the "perfect body." I'd always prided myself on being long and lean when in reality, I undeniably had a consistently chubby athletic build. Even though my physique did not phase my sense of self-worth, or control what I wanted to eat, over time, I grew tired of scrolling through endless photos of me that did not match up with my idealism. I suppose it was this exhaustion that also resurfaced some of the more sour memories from an early age, when my body and diet became topics of cavalier discussion. Like the time I was told my apron was too snug or was warned not to eat too many doughnuts because it would make my face puffy.

With all of this in mind, I decided to embark on a health journey that quickly took a turn for the worse. Exercise became my addiction and something I sought out numerous times a day as I saw my body slimming down. I was so good at being militant in planning, tracking, and controlling my intake, and I prided myself on the loud stomach rumbles I constantly felt. Before I put anything in my mouth, I would Google its caloric value and calculate whether it truly fit within my very low energy intake. What was always acceptable were sparse salads, low-fat yogurts, and diet sodas. Rolls? No way. Coffee cake? Forget about it. My digestive system became increasingly alienated from most foods, let alone baked goods and anything carb-centric.

In the rare moments that I indulged, I would go berserk. I once ate one-eighth of a bagel at a breakfast social and then went to the gym to burn any remnants of it on the treadmill for two hours. I also had a public



mental breakdown upon hungrily chowing down on a pita sandwich after eating nothing all day.

Any baked good came to be something that terrified me to the bone. Living with such constant deprivation led me to barely tolerate my friends and family, whose concerns and efforts to help me registered in my disordered mind as a threat. In pursuit of shaping my ideal size and figure, I compromised real sustenance, socializing, and my sense of self as a food professional.

Before things got irreversibly bad, I sought out professional counseling, talked to others in recovery, and eventually relied on my loved ones to hold me accountable for engaging in my compulsive behaviors. My pivot into professional baking did coincide with the early stages of my recovery process, but the decision was not a calculated part of speeding up my return to health. Yet somehow, perhaps through the same magical alchemy that occurs when dollops of batter transform into a cake, something miraculous occurred.

Naturally, given my state of healing, I walked on eggshells during my initial days at the bakery. The thought of spending a fixed amount of time every day in a setting defined by butter, sugar, and flour haunted me. I rarely ate on the job and opted for chewing gum and chugging cold brew. I took the smallest nibbles of

bomboloni and brioche rolls when taking part in occasional quality checks. I would walk to and from work even after a grueling 10 hours on my feet but justified it as a means of getting some fresh air. These were my ways of protecting myself without intense restriction or shaming.

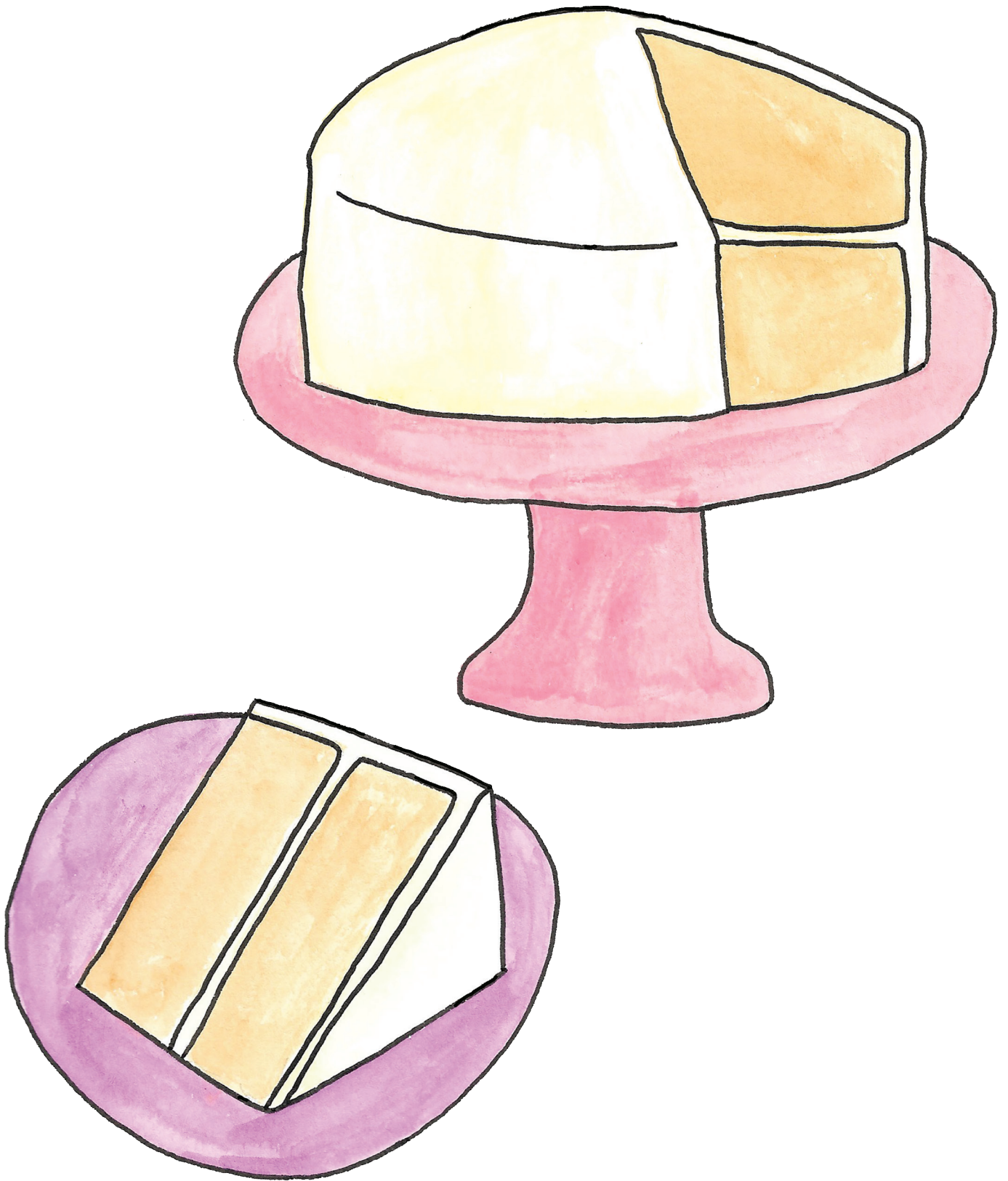
The defense mechanisms I put in place worked to my benefit allowing me to effectively roll out multiple trays of sticky buns, cream together pounds of butter and sugar, and apply heavy finishings of saccharine glaze onto cakes with ease and indifference. Over the course of weeks and months, my workhorse mentality and indifference fermented into a depth of passion and care. My technique improved continuously and that provided me with more responsibilities and opportunities. The child-like whimsy and curiosity for sweets, something I thought I lost with my weight, reignited in small increments whenever I was given chances to experiment with new recipes. I was challenged daily to think critically about the ways to produce pastries and bread of high aesthetic quality and how to troubleshoot issues with food science.

This requirement to shift my focus to all these aspects of pastry served as a form of altruism to rebuild kinship and heal bridges with my community I'd broken during the darkest hours of my eating disorder. I was reminded of those days of eating soft buttery rolls with my grandma to the first layer cake I helped decorate and sell at my first job. A baked good created with intention is appreciated as a physical manifestation of care and memory when gifted or purchased. Not to mention it will taste exceptional.

The joys I've acquired through the various layers of professional baking are allowing me to go further in my recovery journey. When I recontextualized baking back to an artistic and scientific endeavor, I had to remember the very end goal: to make intricate things that everyone, including myself, wants to eat. And that was enough to break me from the vicious cycle of mental and physical unkindness I allowed myself to deem normal. That simple realization helped me appreciate the small victories and beauties of my day-to-day, like the satisfaction of baking loaves that made crackly noises upon coming out of the oven. Or enjoying a fresh scone dressed impeccably in jam and salty butter after a day of work.

Obviously, not every day is easy. There are still some days when I feel like I've eaten too much while working and want to exercise harder or when my mind uses every formula it can to quantify the exact calories in a pastry. But guilt, restriction, and compensation rarely run my engine anymore. I'm learning to take care of myself, honor my body with nourishing meals as well as decadent pastry because both are critical in living. My disordered eating patterns altered my body for better and for worse, but it didn't wash away my spirit and enthusiasm for baking, which were just waiting to be rediscovered.

Somewhere along the way, I've also rediscovered the power of a good coffee cake. Not half of a hefty loaf. Just a nice slice. One that has a fluffy interior accompanied by a crunchy spiced streusel topping and a generously gooey core—all made a bit sweeter by my own relief of just how far I've come.



PEANUT BUTTER AND JAM COFFEE CAKE

Recipe by Justine Lee

Makes 1 (9x5) loaf cake

For the Streusel Topping

3 tablespoons light brown sugar
2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
¼ teaspoon Diamond Crystal Kosher salt
¼ cup rolled oats
2 tablespoons peanut butter
1 tablespoon unsalted butter, melted and cooled

For the Cake

5 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
⅓ cup granulated sugar
¼ cup light brown sugar
2 large eggs
1½ teaspoons vanilla extract
3 tablespoons milk of choice
2 teaspoons apple cider vinegar
1¼ cups all-purpose flour
¼ teaspoon Diamond Crystal Kosher salt
2 teaspoons baking powder
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
⅛ teaspoon ground cardamom
¾ cup raspberry jam, lightly mashed

Heat the oven to 350°F. Spray a 9x5 baking pan with nonstick cooking spray and line with parchment paper.

Prepare the streusel topping. In a small bowl, combine the brown sugar, cinnamon, salt, oats, peanut butter, and butter. Using your hands, lightly knead the mixture until small clusters form. Set aside.

Prepare the base cake layer. In a medium bowl, add the flour, salt, baking powder, cinnamon, and cardamom. Stir to combine and set aside. In another medium bowl, whisk together the butter and sugars until well-combined, 3 to 5 minutes. Add in the eggs and vanilla and beat well. Whisk in the milk and apple cider vinegar. Add the dry ingredients into the wet mixture and fold in until just combined. Pour the batter into the prepared pan and, using a spoon or spatula, spread out evenly. Cover the batter evenly with the mashed jam and use a knife to swirl. Scatter the streusel topping evenly over the cake batter. It's okay if part of the swirled jam-cake layer isn't fully covered; the goal here is to allow some of the jammy parts to shine through.

Place in the oven and bake for 30 to 40 minutes, until the streusel top is crunchy golden brown. Let cool for 25 minutes before serving.

