

In the Spotlight

DECEMBER 1997

Why, wonders Ira Womble, do people associate fruitcake only with the holidays? And why, oh *why*, do the comedians keep harping on that one fruitcake—you know, the lonely doorstep of a confection that's endlessly passed from one person to another.

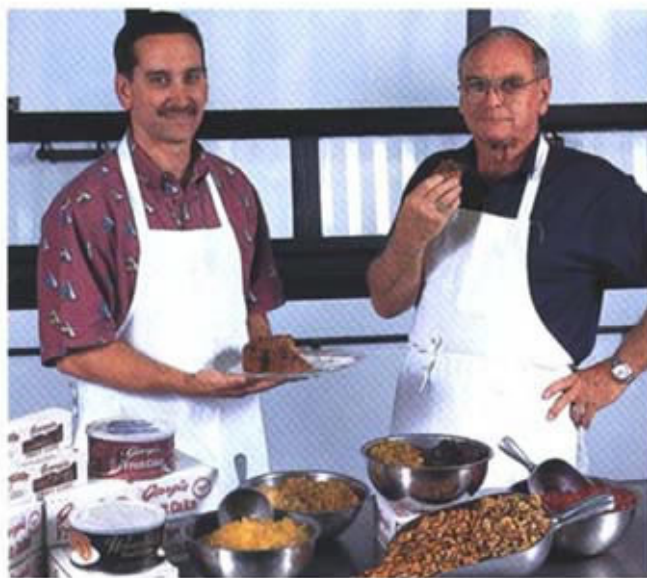
Ira sighs, without a trace of Grinch or grumble. He's even charitable. "Those characters make their living trying to get a laugh," he ventures, speaking of late-night TV's Leno and Letterman. "They can get a laugh off a fruitcake, as long as they don't call it a *Georgia* fruitcake."

Ira, like his father before him, is president of Georgia Fruit Cake Company, by far the smaller of Claxton's two fruitcake concerns. While Claxton Bakery sells to the Civitan Club International and other civic groups for their yearly fundraisers, Ira's company directs its product to government commissaries.

He begins preparing these taste-of-home cakes in July as steam and sizzle attack this quiet southwest Georgia town. Ira and son John, the only authorized batter mixers since Ira, Sr.'s, day, load 1,100 pounds at a time into the huge ovens. During breaks, they nibble, constantly checking quality.

It's a family tradition. They don't add the citron anymore ("It sort of lost its appeal," says Ira), but the mountains of gleaming cherries, pineapple chunks, orange peel, and lemon zest still join the crunch of walnuts, pecans, and almonds. Like grandfather, like father, like son.

Ira, Sr., apprenticed at age 10 for Savino Tos, an Italian who brought fruitcake to the Georgia countryside. (Tos later sold out to



There's nothing funny, everything yummy, about the makings of a fruitcake. Ira Womble, Jr., and son John sustain Georgia Fruit Cake Company, the "other" fruitcake outfit in Claxton.

Albert Parker, whose son runs Claxton Bakery today.) Along the way, the senior Womble met Henry Ford, who took an instant liking to the baker and his goods.

"Ordinarily Ford didn't like big men—he thought

they were dishonest if they were fat," says Ira the son, who shared a birthday with the auto magnate. "He built Dad a bakery at Richmond Hill [near Fort Stewart]. Every year the *Silver Meteor* train would stop in Richmond Hill, pick up Ford's birthday cake, and then deliver it to Dearborn, Michigan. I have the letters from Clara Ford saying she could taste the butter—it was butter flavoring really. This was back during the Second World War."

The business marched on during the war and in years that followed. Young Ira left for a Washington career with the FBI and a tour of duty in the Korean War. After Korea, he had a choice—J. Edgar Hoover or Dad. Dad won, and the fruitcake's happy fate was sealed.

Ira won't quote numbers when it comes to commissary sales. He just cites emotion. "Occasionally I'll get a letter from someone [overseas] who says he couldn't find one of our cakes in the commissary—and I'll send him one. I know what it means to him. I've been there."

As for those comedians: "They make jokes out of fruitcakes, but for us it's a serious business."

Carolanne Griffithx Roberts

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