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**One of my mother's many claims to fame is her love of birthdays, especially her own.** Perhaps it comes from being an only child. Since Nana and Grandpa only had to worry about one birthday, they did it up big. Then of course, her birthday had a habit of falling on Labor Day weekend and the final days of summer vacation. The long holiday weekend became a celebration of all things Elizabeth.

Friends and family gathered on the Cape to fête my mother and enjoy the last days of summer. Since Nana didn't bake, the local bakery was kept very busy. Throughout the weekend, every meal, except maybe breakfast, included candles, cake and ice cream.

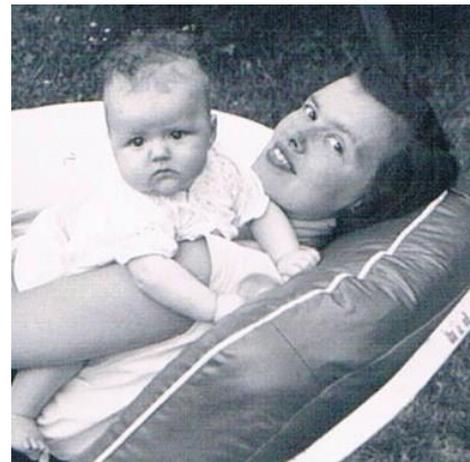
**Since my father loves to tell the story of Mom's girlhood birthday extravaganza,** we grew up hearing about her many parties. By the time we built the little brown house near Pleasant Lake, the endless round had become more finite. If her birthday fell in the middle of the week, she might join her friends for a girls' night out. Dad arrived on Friday and took her out to dinner. At some point over the weekend, my sister or I baked a cake and we'd celebrate with a family dinner.

**Maybe it was Dad's stories or her own goodwill but one year, Brenda decided to throw our mother a surprise birthday bash.** Perhaps it was a way for her to say thank you; she was heading to Colorado in September for college. Everyone assumed it was the big one, Mom's Four-O. It was actually her forty-first and Mom never suspected a thing. She was delighted with the party and didn't mind losing a year.

**For the most part, the party was all Brenda's doing.** Maybe there was a caterer or two in town back then. If there was, we didn't know about them. Dad stocked the bar, I baked the birthday cake but Brenda did everything else. Sure Dad paid the tab but my seventeen-year-old sister put it all together. Brenda figured out the menu, filled a couple of carts at Cricenti's and prepared the food.

**She even hired the bar tenders, her then boyfriend and his cousin.** Neither knew the first thing about pouring a drink but did their best to intoxicate the guests. If the perfect gin and tonic has a ratio of one gin to three tonic, they flipped it. As I remember, they did fuel a bit of fire. The mood was exuberant, the talk and laughter loud and there was much singing if no dancing. At least one drink was thrown ... or maybe that was another night. Luckily, the guests were all close neighbors so the roads stayed safe.

**Mom's not-really-fortieth became the measure of all future surprise parties.** This year marks another milestone for her. She will be eighty-five on Friday. Although there will be cupcakes, I am sad to say there is no big surprise party in the works. Mom still smiles her beautiful smile and brings joy to all who know her but she is in the later stages of Alzheimer's disease. We will visit her with gifts and flowers but Brenda's not-really-fortieth celebration will not be topped. Instead, for the many who love her, Mom's birthday is a good day to reflect on all that she means to us and to raise a toast in her honor.



Happy birthday Mom and bon appétit!

*Susan*

## Double Trouble Chocolate-Orange Cupcakes

*The cupcake may be passé in New York and Los Angeles but it is a welcome birthday treat at the Nyes! Enjoy!*

Makes about 24 cupcakes

3 ounces unsweetened chocolate, chopped  
 1 stick butter, at room temperature and cut in pieces  
 1 cup fresh orange juice  
 2 cups sugar  
 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract  
 1 teaspoon Grand Marnier or orange-flavored liqueur  
 2 eggs, separated  
 1/2 cup sour cream  
 2 cups less 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour  
 Grated zest of 1 orange  
 1 teaspoon baking soda  
 1 teaspoon baking powder  
 1/2 teaspoon salt  
 Chocolate-Orange Ganache (recipe follows)  
 White Chocolate-Cream Cheese Frosting (recipe follows)

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Line muffin tins with paper liners.

Put the chocolate and butter in a large bowl. Put the orange juice in a small saucepan and bring to a boil. Add the orange juice to the chocolate and butter, let everything sit and melt for a few minutes and then whisk to combine.

Stir in the sugar, Grand Marnier and vanilla. Whisk in the egg yolks, one at a time, combining after each addition. Add the sour cream and whisk to combine.

Put the flour, orange zest, baking soda, baking powder and salt in a bowl and whisk to combine. Add the dry ingredients to the chocolate mixture and combine thoroughly.

Beat the egg whites until stiff but not dry. Stir a quarter of the egg whites into the batter and combine thoroughly. Gently fold the remaining egg whites into the batter.





Use an ice cream scoop or two spoons to fill each muffin cup about 2/3rd full with batter. Bake in the middle of the oven for about 20 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the center of a cupcake comes out clean. Cool in the pan for 5-10 minutes, transfer to a wire rack and cool completely.

To assemble: spread warm Chocolate-Orange Ganache on the cupcakes. Place the cupcakes in the refrigerator or freezer and cool until the chocolate has set. With a pastry bag and a large tip, add a hefty dollop of White Chocolate-Cream Cheese Frosting.

*If making ahead, store in the refrigerator. Bring to room temperature before serving.*

### Chocolate-Orange Ganache

1/2 cup heavy cream  
 Grated zest of 1 orange  
 1 tablespoon Grand Marnier or orange-flavored liqueur  
 Pinch salt  
 About 4 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped  
 1 tablespoon butter, cut in pieces

In a small saucepan, heat the cream and zest to steaming. Remove the pan from the heat and let sit for 30 minutes. Strain the cream, add the Grand Marnier and salt and reheat to steaming. Remove the cream from the heat, add the chocolate and butter. Let the chocolate sit for a few minutes and then whisk until the chocolate is smooth and completely melted.

Let the ganache cool for about 10 minutes before frosting the cupcakes.

### White Chocolate-Cream Cheese Frosting

1/2 cup (1 stick) butter, at room temperature  
 8 ounces cream cheese, at room temperature  
 2 tablespoons sour cream  
 About 4 cups confectioners' sugar, sifted  
 1 tablespoon Grand Marnier  
 2 teaspoons vanilla extract  
 8 ounces white chocolate, melted and cooled

Put the butter, cream cheese and sour cream in a bowl and beat with an electric mixer on medium speed until well combined.

Reduce the speed to low, slowly add the confectioners' sugar and beat until just combined. Add the Grand Marnier, vanilla and white chocolate, increase mixer speed to medium-high and continue beating until smooth.

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