Mimi's Poppy Seed Cake

1 cup poppy seeds
1 1/2 cups (whole) milk
3 cups (cake) flour
1 tablespoon baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
1 1/2 cups sugar
3/4 cup butter
1 teaspoon vanilla
4 egg whites

Grease two 9-inch cake pans (or 1 12-cup bundt pan); dust with flour, tap out excess. Combine poppy seeds and 3/4 cup of milk in a small saucepan. Bring to a boil, remove from heat and cover. Let stand until milk is fully absorbed (about 1 hour). Sift together flour, baking powder and salt; set aside.

In a small bowl, beat egg whites until foamy white and doubled in volume. Add ½ cup of the sugar, 1 tablespoon at a time, until meringue forms soft peaks. In a large bowl, beat butter and remaining sugar until smooth; blend in poppy seeds mixture. Add, in turn and a little bit at a time, the flour mixture and the remaining milk and the vanilla; beat after each addition, until the batter is smooth.

Fold meringue into batter until no streaks of white remain; pour into prepared pan(s). Bake at 350 degrees for approximately 30 minutes (35 for a bundt cake) or until cake springs back when lightly pressed. Cool on wire rack 10 minutes before removing from pan. Cool completely before icing.

Lemon Butter Cream Icing

½ cup butter
2 ½ - 3* cups powdered sugar, sifted
2 teaspoons grated lemon rind**
2 tablespoons lemon juice**
2 tablespoons milk
1 ½ teaspoons vanilla

Beat butter until smooth. Add, in turn, sugar and liquids. Blend in lemon rind.

* Use smaller amount of sugar for a bundt cake (drizzle icing over the top)

** Alternatives to Lemon Butter Cream:
Orange : 2 tablespoons orange juice and 2 teaspoons orange rind
Strawberry : 1/3 cup mashed strawberries and no milk
Brandy : 2 tablespoons brandy
Rum : 2 tablespoons rum
Mocha : 3 tablespoons coffee liqueur and 1 tablespoon instant coffee