



COOKING CLASSES

AT SUR LA TABLE

AMERICA'S TEST KITCHEN: SHOWSTOPPER DESSERTS

WITH CHEF DAVID C.

— AMERICA'S —
TEST KITCHEN

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SHOWSTOPPER DESSERTS: WHY THESE RECIPES WORK

Gingerbread Layer Cake

Why This Recipe Works: We wanted the dark, moist crumb and spicy bite of gingerbread in a tender, sophisticated layer cake.

- For fiery flavor, we added 2 tablespoons each of ground ginger and freshly grated ginger, and we enhanced that heat with both white pepper and cayenne pepper.
- Molasses and coffee contributed moisture, rich color, and pleasantly bitter notes that worked well with the spices and sweetness.
- Cocoa powder, an unexpected ingredient in gingerbread, added depth to the color and the flavor and, as it is mostly gluten-free starch and fat, it increased the cake's tenderness.
- To avoid the challenge of slicing thicker layers in half horizontally, we baked four thin layers in two batches.
- Finally, a silky, fluffy, and not-too-sweet ermine frosting, made by beating softened butter into a cooked gel made with milk, sugar, and starch, showed off the spicy, tender cake to its best advantage.

Chocolate Semifreddo with Cherry Sauce and Candied Nuts

Why This Recipe Works: Our goal was a chocolate semifreddo that's rich and creamy but isn't overly complicated.

- We started by preparing a custard-style base of whole eggs, sugar, cream, and water directly on the stovetop (rather than over a fussy water bath).
- We conveniently melted the chocolate by straining the hot custard directly over it.
- To ensure a rich, creamy, and sliceable semifreddo that was also cold and refreshing, we had to balance fat and water: Using whole eggs instead of yolks and cutting the cream in the custard base with a bit of water were key.
- Garnishing the semifreddo with a sweet cherry sauce and crunchy candied nuts added contrast and made for an elegant presentation.

Chewy Chai-Spice Sugar Cookies

Why This Recipe Works: For optimal chew with a crisp outer layer, we had to examine the fat in our cookies.

- We adjusted the fat in our sugar cookie recipe until it hit a ratio of approximately 1 part saturated fat (butter) to 3 parts unsaturated fat (vegetable oil). This ratio was key.
- Instead of creaming the fat and sugar, we whisked them together.
- We used extra flour and baking powder for structure and lift, and extra sugar, salt, and vanilla kept the sugar cookies from being too dry.
- Cream cheese enriched the dough's flavor without adding too much liquid and baking soda kept our sugar cookies flat and crackly.
- For a full-flavored chai spice, we made our own by combining cinnamon, ginger, cardamom, cloves, and black pepper.

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GINGERBREAD LAYER CAKE

Yield: 12-16 servings

Transferring the milk mixture to a wide bowl will ensure that it cools within 2 hours. A rasp-style grater makes quick work of grating the ginger. Use a 2-cup liquid measuring cup to portion the cake batter. Baking four thin cake layers two at a time eliminates the need to halve thicker layers. Do not use blackstrap molasses here, as it is too bitter.

Frosting:

1 1/2 cups (10 1/2 ounces) sugar
1/4 cup (1 1/4 ounces) all-purpose flour
3 tablespoons cornstarch
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 1/2 cups milk
2 tablespoons (3 sticks) unsalted butter, softened
2 teaspoons vanilla extract

Cake:

1 3/4 cups (8 3/4 ounces) all-purpose flour
1/4 cup (3/4 ounce) unsweetened cocoa powder
2 tablespoons ground ginger
1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
3/4 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon ground white pepper
1/3 teaspoon cayenne pepper
1 cup brewed coffee
3/4 cup molasses
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1 1/2 cups (10 1/2 ounces) sugar
3/4 cup vegetable oil
3 large eggs, beaten
2 tablespoons finely grated fresh ginger
1/4 cup chopped crystallized ginger (optional)

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- 1. To prepare the frosting:** Whisk sugar, flour, cornstarch, and salt together in medium saucepan. Slowly whisk in milk until smooth. Cook over medium heat, whisking constantly and scraping corners of saucepan, until mixture is boiling and is very thick, 5 to 7 minutes. Transfer milk mixture to wide bowl and let cool completely, about 2 hours.
 - 2. To prepare the cake:** Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour two 8-inch round cake pans and line pans with parchment paper. Whisk flour, cocoa, ground ginger, baking powder, cinnamon, salt, pepper, and cayenne together in large bowl. Whisk coffee, molasses, and baking soda in second large bowl until combined. Add sugar, oil, eggs, and fresh ginger to coffee mixture and whisk until smooth.
 - Whisk coffee mixture into flour mixture until smooth. Pour 1 1/3 cups batter into each prepared pan. Bake until toothpick inserted in center of cake comes out clean, 12 to 14 minutes. Let cakes cool in pans on wire rack for 10 minutes. Invert cakes onto wire rack and peel off parchment; reinvert cakes. Wipe pans clean with paper towels. Grease and flour pans and line with fresh parchment. Repeat baking and cooling process with remaining batter.
 - Using a stand mixer fitted with paddle, beat butter on medium-high speed until light and fluffy, about 5 minutes. Add cooled milk mixture and vanilla; mix on medium speed until combined, scraping down bowl if necessary. Increase speed to medium-high and beat until frosting is light and fluffy, 3 to 5 minutes.
 - Place 1 cake layer on platter or cardboard round. Using offset spatula, spread 3/4 cup frosting evenly over top, right to edge of cake. Repeat stacking and frosting with 2 more cake layers and 1 1/2 cups frosting. Place final cake layer on top and spread remaining frosting evenly over top and sides of cake. Garnish top of cake with crystallized ginger, if using. Refrigerate cake until frosting is set, about 30 minutes. (Cake can be refrigerated, covered, for up to 2 days. Let cake come to room temperature before serving.)

***ATK pro-tip:** For fiery flavor, we added 2 tablespoons each of ground ginger and freshly grated ginger and enhanced the heat with both white pepper and cayenne pepper.

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CHOCOLATE SEMIFREDDO WITH CHERRY SAUCE AND CANDIED NUTS

Yield: 12 servings

The semifreddo needs to be frozen for at least 6 hours before serving. We developed this recipe with our favorite dark chocolate, Ghirardelli 60% Cacao Bittersweet Chocolate Premium Baking Bar. Do not whip the heavy cream until the chocolate mixture has cooled. If the semifreddo is difficult to release from the pan, run a thin offset spatula around the edges of the pan or carefully run the sides of the pan under hot water for 5 to 10 seconds. If frozen overnight, the semifreddo should be tempered before serving for the best texture. To temper, place slices on individual plates or a large tray, and refrigerate for 30 minutes. Serve the semifreddo as is or with our Cherry Sauce. For some crunch, sprinkle each serving with Quick Candied Nuts.

8 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped fine
1 tablespoon vanilla extract
1/2 teaspoon instant espresso powder
3 large eggs
5 tablespoons sugar
1/4 teaspoon salt
2 cups heavy cream, chilled
1/4 cup water

1. Lightly spray loaf pan with vegetable oil spray and line with plastic wrap, leaving 3-inch overhang on all sides. Place chocolate in large heatproof bowl; set fine-mesh strainer over bowl and set aside. Stir vanilla and espresso powder in small bowl until espresso powder is dissolved.

2. **To prepare the mixture:** Whisk eggs, sugar, and salt in medium bowl until combined. Heat 1/2 cup cream (keep remaining 1 1/2 cups chilled) and water in medium saucepan over medium heat until simmering. Slowly whisk hot cream mixture into egg mixture until combined. Return mixture to saucepan and cook over medium-low heat, stirring constantly and scraping bottom of saucepan with rubber spatula, until mixture is very slightly thickened and registers 160 to 165 degrees, about 5 minutes. Do not let mixture simmer.

3. Immediately pour mixture through strainer set over chocolate. Let mixture stand to melt chocolate, about 5 minutes. Whisk until chocolate is melted and smooth, then whisk in vanilla-espresso mixture. Let chocolate mixture cool completely, about 15 minutes.

4. Using a stand mixer fitted with whisk attachment, beat remaining 1 1/2 cups cream on low speed until bubbles form, about 30 seconds. Increase speed to medium and beat until whisk leaves trail, about 30 seconds. Increase speed to high and continue to beat until nearly doubled in volume and whipped cream forms soft peaks, 30 to 45 seconds longer.

5. Whisk one-third of whipped cream into chocolate mixture. Using rubber spatula, gently fold remaining whipped cream into chocolate mixture until incorporated and no streaks of whipped cream remain. Transfer mixture to prepared pan and spread evenly with rubber spatula. Fold overhanging plastic over surface. Freeze until firm, at least 6 hours.

6. **To serve:** When ready to serve, remove plastic from surface and invert pan onto serving plate. Remove plastic and smooth surface with spatula as necessary. Dip slicing knife in very hot water and wipe dry. Slice semifreddo 3/4-inch-thick, transferring slices to individual plates and dipping and wiping knife after each slice. Serve immediately. (Semifreddo can be wrapped tightly in plastic wrap and frozen for up to 2 weeks.)

***ATK pro-tip:** To ensure a rich, creamy, and sliceable semifreddo that was also cold and refreshing, we had to balance fat and water. Using whole eggs instead of yolks and cutting the cream in the custard base with a bit of water were key.

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CHERRY SAUCE

Yield: 2 cups

This recipe was developed with frozen cherries. Do not thaw the cherries before using. Water can be substituted for the kirsch, if desired.

*12 ounces frozen sweet cherries
1/4 cup sugar
2 tablespoons kirsch
1 1/2 teaspoons cornstarch
1 tablespoon lemon juice*

1. **To prepare the cherries:** Combine cherries and sugar in bowl and microwave for 1 1/2 minutes. Stir, then continue to microwave until sugar is mostly dissolved, about 1 minute longer. Combine kirsch and cornstarch in small bowl.
2. Drain cherries in fine-mesh strainer set over small saucepan. Return cherries to bowl and set aside.
3. **To prepare cherry sauce:** Bring juice in saucepan to simmer over medium-high heat. Stir in kirsch mixture and bring to boil. Boil, stirring occasionally, until mixture has thickened and appears syrupy, 1 to 2 minutes. Remove saucepan from heat and stir in cherries and lemon juice. Let sauce cool completely before serving. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 1 week.)

QUICK CANDIED NUTS

Yield: 1/2 cup

We like this recipe prepared with shelled pistachios, walnut or pecan halves, roasted cashews, salted or unsalted peanuts, and sliced almonds. If you want to make a mixed batch, cook the nuts individually and then toss to combine once you've chopped them.

*1/2 cup nuts
1 tablespoon granulated sugar
1 tablespoon hot water
1/3 teaspoon salt*

1. **To prepare the nuts:** Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Spread nuts in single layer on rimmed baking sheet and toast until fragrant and slightly darkened, 8 to 12 minutes, shaking sheet halfway through toasting. Transfer nuts to plate and let cool for 10 to 15 minutes. Do not wash sheet.
2. **To prepare the candied coating:** Line now-empty sheet with parchment paper. Whisk sugar, hot water, and salt in large bowl until sugar is mostly dissolved. Add nuts and stir to coat. Spread nuts on prepared sheet in single layer and bake until nuts are crisp and dry, 10 to 12 minutes.
3. Transfer sheet to wire rack and let nuts cool completely, about 20 minutes. Transfer nuts to cutting board and chop as desired. (Nuts can be stored at room temperature for up to 1 week.)

***ATK pro-tip:** Garnishing the semifreddo with a sweet cherry sauce and crunch candied nuts added contrast and made for an elegant presentation.

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CHEWY CHAI-SPICE SUGAR COOKIES

Yield: 2 dozen cookies

The final dough will be slightly softer than most cookie dough. For the best results, handle the dough as briefly and gently as possible when shaping the cookies. Overworking the dough will result in flatter cookies.

2 1/4 cups (11 1/4 ounces) unbleached all-purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon table salt
1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon ground ginger
1/4 teaspoon ground cardamom
1/4 teaspoon ground cloves
Pinch pepper
1 1/2 cups (10 1/2 ounces) sugar, plus 1/3 cup for rolling
2 ounces cream cheese, cut into 8 pieces
6 tablespoons (3/4 stick) unsalted butter, melted and still warm
1/3 cup vegetable oil
1 large egg
1 tablespoon milk
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

- 1. To prepare the dough:** Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Line 2 large rimmed baking sheets with parchment paper. Whisk flour, baking soda, baking powder, and salt together in medium bowl. Set aside.
2. Place 1 1/2 cups sugar, cream cheese, cinnamon, ginger, cardamom, cloves, and black pepper in large bowl. Place remaining 1/3 cup sugar in shallow baking dish or pie plate and set aside. Pour warm butter over sugar and cream cheese and whisk to combine (some small lumps of cream cheese will remain but will smooth out later). Whisk in oil until incorporated. Add egg, milk, and vanilla; continue to whisk until smooth. Add flour mixture and mix with rubber spatula until soft homogeneous dough forms.
3. Divide dough into 24 equal pieces, about 2 tablespoons each (or use #40 portion scoop). Using hands, roll dough into balls. Working in batches, roll balls in reserved sugar to coat and evenly space on prepared baking sheet, 12 dough balls per sheet. Using bottom of drinking glass, flatten dough balls until 2 inches in diameter. Sprinkle tops evenly with 4 teaspoons of sugar remaining in shallow dish (2 teaspoons per tray), discarding any remaining sugar.
4. Bake, 1 tray at a time, until edges are set and just beginning to brown, 11 to 13 minutes, rotating tray after 7 minutes. Cool cookies on baking sheets 5 minutes. Using wide metal spatula, transfer cookies to wire rack and cool to room temperature. (Cookies can be stored in airtight container at room temperature for up to 3 days; to refresh, place in 425-degree oven for 4 to 5 minutes.)

***ATK pro-tip:** Instead of creaming the fat and sugar, we whisked them together.

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