Ashley’s Pumpkin Crème Caramel

There are several steps to this stunning dessert, but they can be tackled in stages, and many can be done ahead. The purpose of the water bath, also known as a *bain marie*, is to insulate the delicate custard from the direct heat of the oven, to ensure it turns out smooth and creamy. All it takes is a second pan large and deep enough to hold the cake pan. I often use a roasting pan or my big deep-dish pizza pan.

A Candy Roaster is an heirloom pumpkin that grows well in the Southern mountains. They are banana shaped and can grow to be quite large with dense, delicious, deep orange flesh. It’s my favorite pumpkin, although when I cannot find one, I use the most interesting pumpkin I can find. It’s fun to shop for edible pumpkins at the farmers’ market, although it’s getting much easier to find great cooking pumpkins at the grocery store during the fall. Many of these pumpkins and winter squashes might look like decorative items, but if they are in the produce section, you can eat them. When in doubt, ask.

Ashley is a professional culinary artist when it comes to garnishing and plating her dessert creations, so everything she makes could be on the cover of a magazine. It’s inspiring. You can take a cue from her and make your garnishes, or simply buy them. The important thing is to have fun.

Makes 8 servings

**Custard**
2 cups heavy cream, divided
1 cup homemade pumpkin puree, preferably from a Candy Roaster (recipe follows)
1/2 teaspoon salt
4 cardamom pods, crushed
2 bay leaves
2 cinnamon sticks
2-inch piece of fresh ginger, thinly sliced
1 star anise
1/4 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
4 large eggs
2 large egg yolks
1/3 cup granulated sugar
3 tablespoons firmly packed brown sugar

**Caramel**
2 tablespoons water
1/3 cup granulated sugar
1 tablespoon lemon juice or distilled white vinegar
1. To make the custard: Stir together 1 1/2 cups of the cream, the pumpkin puree, salt, cardamom, bay leaves, cinnamon sticks, ginger, star anise, and nutmeg in a small saucepan. Bring to a simmer over low heat, remove from the heat, cover, and let stand until the mixture cools to room temperature. (This step can be done up to one day ahead. Refrigerate the mixture after it cools.) Strain and discard the solids. Rewarm the cream mixture over low heat.

2. Whisk together the remaining 1/2 cup cream, eggs, egg yolks, granulated sugar, and brown sugar. Whisking continuously, add the warm cream mixture in a slow, steady stream. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve into a clean bowl, cover, and refrigerate until needed.

3. To make the caramel: Position a rack in the center of the oven and preheat to 300°F. Place a 9-inch cake pan inside a larger pan (such as a roasting pan) that will hold the water bath.

4. Pour the 2 tablespoons water and lemon juice into a small, heavy saucepan. Sprinkle the sugar over the water. Bring to a simmer over low heat. Do not stir. Let cook until the sugar melts and turns the color of dark amber. Immediately pour the hot caramel into the cake pan and set aside until the caramel cools and hardens.

5. Pour the chilled custard into the cake pan. Pour enough very hot tap water into the larger pan to come halfway up the side of the cake pan, taking care to avoid splashing water into the custard.

6. Bake until the custard is set around the outside with slight jiggle (but not slosh) in the center 2 inches, about 45 minutes. Remove the cake pan from the water bath and place on a wire rack. Let the custard cool to room temperature. It will continue to set as it cools. Cover and refrigerate overnight or up to three days.

7. To unmold, run a knife around the edge of the custard to loosen it from the pan. Cover with a rimmed serving plate that can contain any caramel drips. Flip the pan and plate together and give them a shake so that the custard can fall onto the plate. (This might take a couple of shakes.) Lift away the pan.

8. Serve lightly chilled, garnished as you like.

Potential Garnishes:

- Dried apple, pear, and/or persimmon slices
- Gooseberries or ground cherries
- Fresh currants
- Plain or candied nuts
- Crumbled nut brittle
- Crumbled cookies

© 2021 Ashley Capps
Homemade Pumpkin Purée

This is my go-to method for preparing homemade pumpkin or winter squash puree to use in recipes. It freezes well, so I generally make a lot at once (which can be inevitable when the pumpkin is huge), and then portion it into amounts I’m likely to use in recipes, usually 1 to 2 cups, to stash in the freezer and pull out when needed. If you’ve tried homemade before and weren’t thrilled with the results, please try again. This is easy. I promise.

Be sure to use a pumpkin made for eating, such as a pie pumpkin, sugar baby, or cheese pumpkin. Most winter squashes make good “pumpkin” purée as well. Pumpkins used for jack-o-lanterns are meant only for carving; although they won’t harm you, they are flavorless, stringy, and watery.

Preheat the oven to 400ºF. Line a rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper. Cut the pumpkin in half from top to bottom. If the pumpkin weighs more than 4 pounds, cut it into large wedges. Scoop out and discard the seeds. Place the pieces cut-side down on the prepared baking sheet. Roast until it is easily pierced with a knife, 45 to 90 minutes depending on the size and type of pumpkin. Let cool enough to handle and then scoop the flesh from the shells.

Purée the flesh in a food processor or force it through a food mill into a bowl. The purée must have the thick, firm consistency of canned pumpkin. If it is too watery, spoon it into a sieve lined with a couple of layers of white paper towels or a large coffee filter set over a bowl. Press a piece of plastic wrap onto the surface of the purée. Refrigerate overnight. Discard the collected liquid. Store covered and refrigerated for up to 3 days or freeze in an airtight container for up to 3 months.

© 2021 Sheri Castle.