Fresh Apple Cake with Cider Caramel

This is one of my favorite cakes in the world, one that my family has made for years. There’s barely enough gently spiced batter to hold all the apples and nuts in place. It’s proof that a cake doesn’t have to be made in layers and frosted to be impressive. I like to call this one of my countertop cakes, one that I can leave sitting out so that people can serve themselves. I’ve been known to nibble a bit, too. You know, just a sliver to even up the edge.

When unsure which type of apple to use in baking, use a medley of different varieties, such as one of each type available. Working together, they make up for one another’s shortcomings and bring out the best features of them all.

The cake is poked and bathed with a simple glaze that keeps it moist, and it doesn’t need to be accompanied or garnished with a thing, and yet that doesn’t keep me from occasionally gilding the lily by serving it with dollops of Tangy Whipped Cream and generous drizzles of Apple Cider Caramel. Sometimes too much is just enough.

Makes 12 servings

Cake
Nonstick cooking spray
3 cups all-purpose flour, preferably unbleached
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon ground cardamom
1/2 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg or ground mace
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 cup firmly packed light brown sugar
1 cup granulated sugar
1 1/2 cups vegetable oil, preferably grapeseed oil
3 large eggs
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
5 cups peeled, cored, and diced baking apples
1 1/2 cups walnut pieces

Glaze
4 tablespoons (1/2 stick) butter
1/4 cup firmly packed light brown sugar
1/4 cup granulated sugar
Pinch of salt
1/2 cup heavy cream
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Optional Accompaniments: Tangy Whipped Cream and Apple Cider Caramel (recipes follows)
1. For the cake: Position a rack in the center of the oven and preheat the oven to 325°F. Mist the inside of a 9-by-13-inch light color and lightweight metal baking pan.
2. Sift or thoroughly whisk together the flour, baking soda, cinnamon, cardamom, nutmeg, and salt in a medium-size bowl.
3. Beat the brown sugar, granulated sugar, and oil in a large bowl with a mixer set to high speed until the sugar no longer looks grainy and the mixture is smooth, about 4 minutes.
4. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition. Scrape the bowl with a spatula.
5. Add the flour mixture in thirds, beating on low speed only until it disappears into the batter. Quickly beat in the vanilla. Scrape the bowl with a spatula to make sure all of the flour mixture is incorporated. The batter will be thick.
6. Use the spatula to fold the apples and walnuts into the batter. Transfer into the prepared pan.
7. Bake in the center of the oven until a tester inserted into the center of the cake comes out clean, about 1 hour. Let the cake cool to room temperature in the pan on a wire rack.
8. For the glaze: Melt the butter in a medium-size saucepan over medium heat. Add the brown sugar, granulated sugar, and salt. Stir until smooth and cook for 2 minutes. Stir in the cream, bring to a boil, and cook until the glaze thickens, about 5 minutes. Remove the pan from the heat and stir in the vanilla.
9. Use a chopstick or skewer to poke holes about 2 inches apart all over the cake.
10. Slowly pour the glaze over the cake, letting it seep down into the holes. Let sit until the glaze sets up a bit, at least 10 minutes, before cutting.

**Tangy Whipped Cream**

The cultured cream known as crème fraîche (or good old sour cream) adds just enough tang to this whipped cream to temper the sweetness of the cake and caramel.

Makes about 2 cups

1 cup whipping cream, chilled
1/4 cup confectioners’ sugar
4 tablespoons crème fraîche or sour cream

Whip the cream and confectioners’ sugar in a large bowl to soft peaks with a mixer set to high speed. Fold in the crème fraîche. Serve soon or cover and chill until needed. If made ahead, whisk vigorously to restore the volume.

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Apple Cider Caramel Sauce

This is one of the easiest caramel sauces in the world, and also one of the most delicious. Once you stir things together, you don’t have to tend the pot other than giving it a glance and a quick stir from time to time. In a couple of hours, it will have reduced and thickened into cider heaven. This keeps in the fridge for weeks and makes a great gift. You can use it with the Fresh Apple Cake (of course), but also other cakes and atop ice cream. I sometimes even stir a spoonful into a cup of hot tea or toddy.

Makes 1 1/2 cups

4 cups unfiltered apple cider
1/2 cup bourbon
1/3 cup firmly packed dark brown sugar
1/4 cup light corn syrup
2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg or ground mace
1/4 teaspoon ground cardamom
1 1/2 cups heavy cream
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt

1. Bring the cider, bourbon, sugar, corn syrup, lemon juice, cinnamon, nutmeg, and cardamom to a lively simmer in a large saucepan over medium-high heat, stirring until the sugar dissolves

2. Stir in the cream. (Don’t worry if the mixture looks curdled at first, just keep stirring.) Continue simmering until the mixture reduces to 1 1/2 cups, about 2 hours more, stirring occasionally.

3. Remove the pan from heat. Stir in the vanilla and salt. Serve warm.

Make-Ahead note: Cool, cover, and refrigerate in a glass jar for up to one month. Reheat gently in a saucepan before serving; don’t microwave.

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