

Cooking Corner: Souffle simplicity

by Various Authors - Creators Syn

Timing, in all things, is everything, and that's especially so for the elegant, special-occasion dessert known as the souffle.

When done well, it emerges from the oven as a puffed-up, airy "albeit rich" confection that is sure to dazzle diners. Done poorly, it settles into a sunken mass devoid of the lighter-than-air quality of the perfect souffle.

Chef Bernard Guillas uses a ladel to pour souffle batter into a ramekin. Photo by K.C. Alfred. When done well, a souffle emerges from the oven as a puffed-up, airy confection that is sure to impress dinner guests. Photo by K.C. Alfred. That said, this time-honored dessert, which you might be inclined to order during a romantic dinner out but wouldn't dare attempt at home, is actually far simpler to make than you might expect.

In fact, souffles are much less challenging to execute for the home cook than for a restaurant chef, who faces complicated timing issues when trying to turn out meals for dozens of diners while also delivering to the table the perfectly inflated souffle.

Consider the Herculean task faced by Chicago pastry chef and restaurateur Gale Gand when she was asked to make 125 souffles for a bar mitzvah. She succeeded, but not without a few trial runs and a pair of blistered hands.

"We only had 10 runners to deliver the souffles, so I couldn't have all 125 come out of the oven at once," recalled Gand. "So we did trial runs to see how long it took them to pick up two souffles, get to the dining room, drop them on the table, explain what they are, and get back to the kitchen. The answer was six and a half minutes. We had to have six different ovens with six different timers, and every six and a half minutes had to move to the next oven."

Gand wore surgical gloves to remove the baked souffles from their water baths but discovered that by the time the last of the 125 souffles was served, her hands were covered with blisters. "I couldn't cook for a week," she said.

Gand, though, remains a souffle fan.

While the sort of well-timed choreography Gand undertook is equally important for the home cook, the process involves little more than having your dinner guests seated at the table and dessert plates and sauces at the ready when the souffles come out of the oven. And if fear of failure is holding you back, use your friends and family as guinea pigs and experiment in your kitchen first.

"I cannot have souffles on my menu, because my kitchen is way too small for it," said Bernard Guillas, executive chef of The Marine Room in La Jolla. "But do I do them at my house? Yes, all the time, because you can whip them up ahead of time, and all your friends say, 'Wow, this is good.' And it can be a no-brainer recipe."

A souffle, which gets its name from the French verb souffler, meaning to blow or puff, can be savory or sweet. It starts with a thick, flavorful base that is lightened with whipped egg whites. In the savory category, cheese is popular, while chocolate and Grand Marnier are more traditional dessert varieties. But the choices are endless, from gingerbread and butterscotch to raspberry and Meyer lemon.

Chefs point out that souffles can actually prove profitable for a restaurant because they rely largely on inexpensive ingredients, like sugar, eggs and butter.

And really, they're not that hard to make, cooking experts insist. As long as the ingredients are mixed, whipped and combined properly, the laws of physics will do the rest.

As food scientist Harold McGee explains, when a soufflé goes into a hot oven, its "air bubbles heat up and swell, so the mix expands in the only direction it can: out the top of the dish." Helping along the inflation process is the evaporation of water from the bubble walls, which vaporizes into steam and expands the bubbles, forcing the mixture to rise even more.

"I think there's a mystique about soufflés, but I find them to be super simple," said San Diego cooking instructor and caterer Dee Biller. "You can do all the preparation ahead, up to beating the egg whites into the mix."

In fact, there are some chocolate soufflé recipes where you can make the individual soufflé mixtures entirely ahead of time, freeze them and then bake them without thawing.

Ultimately, the key to a successful soufflé is the beating and folding in of the egg whites. Experts recommend starting with room-temperature or slightly warmed egg whites and advise against over-beating. The texture should be glossy and medium stiff, similar to a Frosty Freeze curl when you remove the whisk, says Biller. The addition of a pinch of cream of tartar, while not essential, is said to heighten the volume of the finished soufflé.

Prior to folding in the whites, it's best to stir in a quarter of them to lighten the base. Then gently fold in the remaining whites, using a scooping action. It's not necessary to incorporate every bit of white until it's no longer visible. You don't want to cause all those valuable air bubbles to collapse.

Preparation of the soufflé dishes before filling them is also an important step. They need to be properly greased with butter and then coated with a thin layer of sugar that gives the dessert a slight crust.

"For souffles in individual ramekins, they usually take 15 to 20 minutes to bake at 350 to 400 degrees," said James Foran, the pastry chef at Market Restaurant in the upscale California community of Del Mar. "I wouldn't open the oven until 15 minutes has passed. A good souffle rises an inch and a half in a four-ounce ramekin."

While it may seem like you're gilding the lily, dessert souffles are even better with a sweetened sauce, such as cr me anglaise or perhaps a caramel or raspberry sauce.

You or your guests can simply pierce the crusty top with a knife or spoon to create an opening and then pour away. The sauce melds with the souffle's silken interior, and voil , you have a perfectly decadent ending to a romantic dinner.

POINT REYES BLUE CHEESE SOUFFLE

4 tablespoons unsalted butter

1/2 cup all-purpose flour

2 cups cold milk

3/4 cup crumbled Point Reyes Blue Cheese

6 egg yolks

Kosher salt and ground black pepper, to taste

6 egg whites

Yields 8 (4-ounce) souffl s.

Melt butter in heavy saucepan. Add flour, stirring briskly with wooden spoon until incorporated. Add cold milk slowly to make a thick cream sauce, whisking continually. Cook for about 10 minutes over moderate heat.

Remove mixture from heat and add to bowl of a stand mixer. Stir in crumbled blue cheese. Allow to cool slightly. Attach whisk attachment and, at high speed, beat in 1 egg yolk at a time. Season to taste with salt and pepper. In a separate bowl, whip egg whites until soft peaks form. Fold into cheese-egg mixture.

Preheat oven to 300 F. Spray eight 4-ounce souffl  cups with nonstick spray. Fill cups to within 1/2 inch of top. Place baking dish large enough to hold souffl  cups in oven, place souffl  cups in baking dish, and pour water into baking dish to come halfway up the sides of the souffl  cups. Bake for 15 to 18 minutes, until puffed and lightly brown on top. Remove from oven, let cool and unmold onto buttered parchment paper.

  From executive chef Carl Schroeder of the Market Restaurant in Del Mar, Calif.

CHOCOLATE SOUFFLE WITH CREME ANGLAISE

CREME ANGLAISE

3/4 cup granulated sugar

6 extra-large egg yolks

2 cups whole milk

2 cups heavy cream

1 vanilla bean, split

1/4 cup Mandarin Napoleon liqueur

SOUFFLE

1 tablespoon unsalted butter, softened

8 teaspoons granulated sugar

10 ounces chopped dark chocolate, 72 percent cocoa

3 tablespoons unsalted butter

6 large egg yolks

6 large egg whites

1/8 teaspoon cream of tartar

Pinch sea salt

1/4 cup granulated sugar

4 ounces dark chocolate, 72 percent cocoa, cut into 8 pieces

2 tablespoons powdered sugar

Yields 8 servings.

To make Creme Anglaise: Whisk sugar and egg yolks in mixing bowl until pale yellow and ribbons form when you lift the whisk. Place milk, cream and vanilla bean in saucepan over medium-high heat. Bring to a boil. Slowly add 1 cup milk mixture to egg yolks, whisking constantly. Whisk tempered egg-yolk mixture into remaining milk mixture in saucepan over medium heat. Bring mixture to 180 degrees, stirring constantly with a heat-proof rubber spatula. Do not boil. Strain through fine sieve into stainless-steel bowl set over ice bath, to stop cooking process. Whisk to cool quickly. Return vanilla bean to creme anglaise. Stir in Mandarin Napoleon liqueur. Refrigerate.

For souffle: Preheat oven to 375 F. Lightly butter eight 6-ounce souffle dishes. Coat inside of each dish with 1 teaspoon sugar. Set aside.

Place chopped chocolate and 3 tablespoons butter in a large mixing bowl set over pot of barely simmering water, ensuring bottom of bowl does not touch water. Stir until melted. Remove from heat. Whisk in egg yolks, one at a time.

In another mixing bowl, beat egg whites, cream of tartar and pinch of salt until soft peaks form. Add 1/4 cup sugar. Beat to stiff peaks. Whisk a quarter of the egg whites into melted chocolate. Use a rubber spatula to gently fold in remaining egg whites. Spoon mixture into prepared souffle dishes. Insert one piece of chocolate

into center of each souffle. Bake 12 minutes, or until nicely puffed.

For presentation: Dust top of souffles with powdered sugar before serving. At the table, tell your guests to puncture souffles with a dessert spoon and pour in creme anglaise.

â€” From executive chef Bernard Guillas, The Marine Room in San Diego.

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