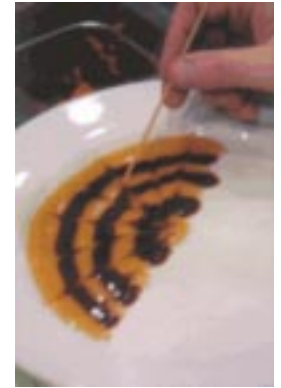


ESPRESSO CRÈME BRULEE



*Award-Winning chef, and culinary poet, Lamar Thomas, has contributed this month's recipe, which can be found in his soon to be published book, **Ginger, Lily, and Sweet Fire: A Romance with Food**. To experience Thomas' world class cuisine visit him at the East West Bistro in Downtown Athens.*

Hooray for sweets! Today we are going to indulge in variations on two very classic desserts. One, crème brûlée, and the other, dessert egg rolls that are reminiscent of blintzes and fruit crepes, but better. Holiday desserts are fun, of course you must make the family traditional pie, have the requisite ambrosia, and then the surprise that redefines your holiday dinner with a new tradition. And the holidays are all about surprises, aren't they? These desserts are very easy, and rewarding. Once you learn how to do the basics you can stretch out on your own with different flavors.



CRÈME BRÛLÉE

2-1/3 cups half and half
1/3 cup sugar
6 whole eggs
8 egg yolks
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
3 ounces espresso boiled down to 1 ounce
1 pint raspberries
1/2 cup light brown sugar, sifted

This is a popular dessert that is easier to prepare at home than you may think. It's one of those restaurant dessert staples that have a certain mystery of crispy, smooth and rich; as if it just can't be made at home. No way! You can do it. When you have made it once with success, you can vary the flavor any way you like through the use of extracts and reduced liquors, including espresso. Where I suggest vanilla extract, you may use orange blossom water, almond liquor, orange liquor, chocolate, even mango, peach, coconut, papaya, passion fruit, and any kind of fresh berries. This is where you have fun; adding flavor reductions, liquors, or extracts that you want to taste with the crème brûlée. Now, there's nothing wrong with sticking to the classic dish of the custard, vanilla and browned sugar. There is a reason it is a classic. I just like to have fun with all the tastes and flavors of the world that combine so very, very well.

The recipe is for six healthy (?) portions cooked in a 9-inch glass or ceramic baking dish. If you want to do individual servings then buy the 5 to 6 ounce custard or soufflé cups in the specialty section at a kitchen supply store. You will need a mixing bowl, whisk, your baking dish, a heavy saucepan, a high-sided baking/roasting pan to set the crème brûlée dish in, and a wooden spoon. If you don't have a 9-inch dish then a 10-inch dish is ok, just add an extra egg and egg yolk to the recipe.

Heat the half-and-half on medium; remove from heat just as it begins to rise in the pan. Do not boil. Be careful, if you boil the liquid you run the chance of curdling the milk, which will make the custard lumpy or grainy.

In the mixing bowl whisk the sugar and eggs into a light froth. Put the whisk aside and pick up the wooden spoon, now slowly stir in the cooked half-and-half. Pour it back into the saucepan and heat on low heat for four minutes while stirring with a wooden spoon. The wood doesn't taint the mixture with any kind of metal flavor. There's a chemical reaction that takes place with eggs and cream when heated with metal, the taste is not good. So use a wooden spoon. Move the spoon back and forth in the liquid while heating, add the vanilla extract midway through the cooking. You will do this for ten minutes, at that time the mixture will lightly coat the spoon when you lift it out of the pan.

Preheat oven to 350. Add berries to custard dish. Stir the espresso into the custard and pour into your baking dish. Place the custard into the roasting pan. Fill the roasting pan with water so that the water reaches the halfway point on the sides of the custard dish. This is called a water bath. The water surrounding the custard dish allows a constant and even temperature so that the edges of the custard do not cook faster than the center. Cover with aluminum foil.

Cook for forty minutes on the center rack of the oven at 350.

Check the custard with a thin knife or wooden skewer by inserting into the middle of the custard and slowly pulling it out. If it is clean then the custard is ready. If it is moist with custard, then cook another 10 minutes. Cook times vary from oven to oven, it all depends on if it is gas or electric (gas a little longer), and on the hot spots and temperature recall in your oven. Temperature recall is how evenly and quickly your oven maintains constant temperature. I am sure you've noticed this when cooking bread or biscuits.

Take the custard out of the water bath and let cool on a cooling rack.

If you don't have a classic pie or cookie cooling rack then use a rack from your oven set on a couple of saucers.

After it reaches room temperature cover with plastic wrap and poke several small holes in the plastic. This allows the moist heat to circulate out of the dish, which then allows the cold air in. If it is wrapped and left covered tightly then there is a chance that molds may form. Refrigerate for at least two hours at a temperature below 40 degrees.

When you are ready for dessert sprinkle the top of each custard with a tablespoon of light brown sugar and place under broiler for 2 to 3 minutes. Keep the door open and watch them cook. When the sugar sizzles and begins to turn a light tan they are ready to eat. Please don't be too bold and let your custard stay under the broiler beyond the tan point. If you go all the way to brown then you run the risk of burning the sugar.

Serve hot right out of the oven. Cut the portions at the table, or let your guests cut their own portions. Part of the fun of crème brûlée is that moment of cracking the sugar crust and smelling the mix of hot sugar and cool custard rising out of the pan. Garnish with fresh mint and some kind of fresh berry, a fruit puree and dark chocolate syrup. Make three fruit puree circles about the size of a quarter on your plate at the 1-6-10 o'clock positions. In the center of each one make a smaller circle with the chocolate sauce. Using the tip of a knife or the tip of a bamboo skewer pull from the middle of the chocolate down through the puree in the shape of a comma (.). This will give you three heart shaped sauce garnishes on the plate. Set the custard slightly off center in the plate. Arrange 3 raspberries on the edge of the custard and insert a stem of fresh mint between the berries and the dessert. Looks good tastes good. I hope that I have taken the mystery out of this dish for you and shown how to make it your own.

PAPAYA AND CREAM CHEESE EGG ROLLS

WITH YOUR FAVORITE ICE CREAM



This recipe is for four egg rolls. It's easy to increase the recipe. Why? Because you just keep rolling egg rolls until you run out of mix. Once you fry them you can store them in the refrigerator for a couple of days, and reheat in the oven at 350 degrees for 8 minutes, or in the microwave on high for one and half minutes. Either way, hot out of the oil or reheated you are going to have a lovely treat. Does this make you think of a blintz or fruit crepe? It should, it's just another variation on what we can do with the ingredients and techniques that exemplify the pluralism of American dining.

4	egg roll wrappers
½	ripe papaya, small, diced
½	banana, small, diced
½ teaspoon	ginger powder
3 ounces	cream cheese
2 tablespoons	brown sugar
1	egg, beaten
1-1/2 cup	peanut or your preferred frying oil

Always remember that if you do not like papaya or banana, you can substitute mango and apple, or strawberries and pears, or raspberries. You can also add nuts to this egg roll. The limits are those of your imagination. And the great thing is that the imagination is without limits.

Dice and mix fruit with cream cheese. Sprinkle board with one tablespoon brown sugar. Set the egg roll wrappers on the brown sugar with one point of the wrapper facing you; place a fourth of the mix in the center of each. Fold the egg roll tip closest to you over the mix and tighten. Brush the egg roll around the edges with the beaten egg. Fold in the two opposing edges over the center roll. Now roll it over until you have a smooth cylinder. Brush with egg and roll over in brown sugar.

Heat oil to 335 degrees. Gently, very gently add the egg rolls one by one to the oil and fry for five minutes. Turn them over once a minute.

Remove from oil and place on paper towel to drain excess oil.

We will use fruit and chocolate purees for this dessert as well. On the plate make three semi-circles with a quarter inch separation between each line with the fruit puree. In the spaces make three semi-circles with the chocolate puree. Using the end of a knife slowly pull the tip through the lines outward towards the edge of the plate. Do this at five different places. This gives your plate a whimsical canvas of color and symmetry. And that means smiles and happy dining.

Cut each egg roll in the center at a 45 degree angle. Set on plate with pointy ends facing each other. Scoop ice cream in middle. That's it. Feels good, doesn't it?

