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No flour

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No flour, lots of taste in these cakes

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Sunday, December 3, 2000

Forget the holiday cookies and log cakes. For a more elegant -- and tasteful -- seasonal delight, try chocolate.

Flourless chocolate, that is.

While flourless chocolate cakes aren't exactly what comes to mind when you think of Santa or reindeer, they are a more-than-adequate substitute for yule logs and green, sugar-dusted cookies.

"It would be a great choice for a holiday dessert," says Mary Lou Simmelink, pastry chef at Hotel Metro, 411 E. Mason St. "It freezes very well, and you don't have to do a lot to dress it up. A little dusting of powdered sugar, cocoa or even cranberry compote. It also transports well."

And despite its trappings as a difficult gourmet treat, a flourless chocolate cake is surprisingly easy to make.

"That's the fabulous part," says Brett Feuersthaler, head chef of the Velvet Room, 730 Old World 3rd St. "You think I'm amazing, but you, too, can make it."

In fact, they're easier to make than many cakes because there's no assembly of layers, and you don't have to deal with a difficult frosting, either.

Flourless chocolate cakes are basically just eggs, sugar, butter and chocolate. Sometimes, a flourless recipe might call for whipping cream or even a ground nut mixture, but that's about it. If there is flour added, it's usually only a tablespoon or two, and that can be eliminated for people who have gluten allergies, Simmelink says.

"It's a very dense cake, much moister than" regular chocolate cake, Simmelink says.

Flourless chocolate cakes also give more of a punch than an average devil's-food cake.

"A typical chocolate cake starts with cocoa powder or unsweetened chocolate," Simmelink says. "For flourless, you can use as much as a pound of chocolate. It's a big dose of chocolate."

Feuersthaler prefers flourless chocolate tortes to chocolate cakes.

"It's just richer, and you're able to taste the cocoa bean, the essence of what chocolate is," she says. "It is a much more intense flavor."

Because the chocolate isn't watered down, it's important to start with a high-quality chocolate.

"Unless you use an excellent chocolate, there is no point in making a chocolate dessert," Feuersthaler says. "Before buying, try a

sample first. You should be able to close your eyes and know that you're eating chocolate, not wax or worse."

Simmelink uses Callebaut, a Belgian chocolate, in the flourless desserts she makes for Hotel Metro.

"If I had no budget constraints, I'd use Valhrona," Simmelink says.

Valhrona, a French chocolate, is also the chocolate of choice for Jill Prescott, chef and owner of Ecole de Cuisine cooking school in Kohler.

Feuersthaler prefers to use Guittard, another Belgian chocolate, which has a very high fat content.

"The chocolates I use are all couverture quality, which means that they contain between 31% and 38% cocoa butter and between 39% and 61% pure chocolate," Feuersthaler says. "The taste and the texture of a finished dessert is based as much on the amount of fat or cocoa butter in the chocolate as the amount of pure chocolate."

If you don't want to make a special trip to a specialty grocery store, Simmelink says Ghiradelli is a good brand, and Feuersthaler says her favorite American chocolate is Hershey's.

"You should use a chocolate that tastes good to you," Simmelink says.

In addition to the different brands of chocolate, there are different kinds of chocolate. Milk chocolate is made from lightly roasted cocoa beans, which means it has more cocoa butter than dark chocolate, and it also had milk powder mixed in, Feuersthaler says.

Milk chocolate has a higher content of sugar than a semi-sweet chocolate. Both can be used in recipes, but perhaps the finest kind of chocolate to use is bittersweet, Prescott says.

"It has this wonderful deep chocolate flavor," Prescott says, adding that it should not be confused with unsweetened chocolate, which has a very different flavor.

White chocolate is made from lightly roasted beans mixed with cocoa butter and powdered milk, but it is technically not a chocolate.

"It does not contain the pure chocolate that comes from the center of the cocoa bean, which also gives darker chocolate its color," Feuersthaler says.

In buying white chocolate, be sure that it contains cocoa butter and not vegetable oil, Feuersthaler cautioned.

Besides getting a good quality chocolate, other ingredients to be aware of are butter and cream. It's best to use unsalted butter, and it's best to use a cream that has a 40% fat content.

Unsalted butter has a cleaner taste, Simmelink says, explaining that salt is added to butter to preserve it. Margarine should never be used in flourless cakes, and Prescott advises against ever using it, period.

Prescott recommends using creams such as Golden Guernsey that have a 40% milkfat. She says creams that have a 36% or 38% milkfat contain carrageen or guar gum, thickening agents derived from plants. Those creams tend to not settle as well as a 40% milkfat cream, and they run.

"Those are the creams that sit in puddles on top of pumpkin pie," Prescott says. "All this nonsense about chilled beaters . . . you just don't purchase swill."

When you get ready to melt the chocolate, use a double boiler, and make sure the water doesn't touch the bottom of the top part of the boiler, Simmelink says.

The boiler should be completely dry, and the steam should not actually come in contact with the chocolate, otherwise it will seize, Feuersthaler says.

Even a drop of water, from washed hands, can ruin a good chocolate, Prescott says.

Chocolate melts at 88 degrees, and its temperature should not rise above 100 degrees, Feuersthaler says.

"I like to do it at 94 degrees," she says. "At that temperature, you can't lose."

The chocolate should be used while it is warm because as soon as it begins to cool, it will harden around the edges of the bowl. If that happens, it can be remelted any number of times.

Feuersthaler says novice chefs should pick a recipe and follow it exactly the first few times making it.

"You'll get to a point where you can experiment and add different things to it," she says.

Liquors, fruits and nuts can be added to a basic flourless chocolate cake recipe. The cake can be presented simply, garnished with mint and maybe a dollop of cream, or they can be served with a side of caramel sauce, creme anglais or fruit.

"Most fruits work except for pineapple or kiwi," Feuersthaler says. "It doesn't set up right because of the acid."

The following recipe is one of Simmelink's favorite flourless chocolate cakes. It comes from "Baking with Julia," based on the PBS series hosted by Julia Child and Dorie Greenspan (William Morrow & Co., 1996, \$32). There is a small amount of flour, which can be eliminated without harming the cake, Simmelink says.

Boca Negra

White chocolate cream (see recipe)

12 ounces bittersweet chocolate, coarsely chopped

1 1/3 cups sugar (divided)

1/2 cup bourbon

1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, cut into pieces, at room temperature

5 large eggs

1 1/2 tablespoons flour

Prepare white chocolate cream at least one day ahead.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly butter 9-inch round cake pan, and line bottom with parchment or waxed paper; butter the paper. Put cake pan in shallow roasting pan and set aside until needed.

Put chopped chocolate in bowl. In 2-quart saucepan, mix 1 cup of the sugar and the bourbon and cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until sugar dissolves and mixture comes to full boil. Immediately pour hot syrup over the chocolate, and stir until chocolate is completely melted and mixture is smooth. Piece by piece, add butter to chocolate mixture. Make sure that each piece is melted before you add another piece.

Put eggs and remaining 1/3 cup sugar in medium bowl and whisk until eggs thicken slightly. Add eggs to chocolate mixture, and whisk until well blended. Gently whisk in flour.

Pour and scrape batter into prepared pan, running your spatula over top to smooth it. Pour enough hot water into roasting pan to come about 1 inch up sides of cake pan. Bake cake in preheated oven 30 minutes, at which point top will have a thin, dry crust.

Remove cake pan from its water bath, wipe pan dry and cover top of cake with sheet of plastic wrap. Invert cake onto flat plate, peel off parchment, and quickly but gently invert cake again onto serving platter; remove plastic.

Serve cake warm or at room temperature with chilled white chocolate cream. Makes 8 to 10 servings.

White chocolate cream:

12 ounces white chocolate, finely chopped

1 cup whipping cream

1/4 cup bourbon (or more, to taste)

Put white chocolate into food processor. Heat cream in small saucepan until small bubbles form around edge of pan. Pour cream over chocolate and process until completely smooth. Add bourbon, taste and add up to 1 tablespoon more if you want. Pour into container with tight-fitting lid and chill overnight. Cream can be kept covered in refrigerator for up to a week or frozen up to a month.

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This creation is from Feuersthaler.

Chocolate Flourless

Mandarin Torte

16 ounces bittersweet chocolate

7 egg yolks

1 whole egg

1/8 cup sugar

4 ounces orange-flavored liqueur such as Grand Marnier

1/4 cup whipping cream

3 cans (11 ounces each) mandarin oranges

2 ounces of melted or shaved chocolate for garnish

Melt 16 ounces chocolate in double boiler over about 3 cups simmering water. Once melted, turn off heat. Transfer chocolate to another bowl and clean out top of double boiler.

In double boiler, whisk together egg yolks, whole egg, sugar, Grand Marnier and cream. Cook mixture over about 3 cups simmering water, stirring constantly, until thickened, which takes about 10 minutes. Remove from heat.

Line 10-inch cake pan with plastic wrap. Combine chocolate and egg mixture, pour into lined pan and refrigerate 4 hours.

Drain oranges and pat dry. Unmold torte onto serving plate. Arrange oranges on top of torte. Drizzle with melted chocolate or top with shaved chocolate, using remaining 2 ounces of chocolate. Makes about 8 to 10 servings.

The following recipe is from "Chocolate Passion: Recipes and Inspiration from the Kitchens of Chocolatier Magazine" by Tish Boyle and Timothy Moriarty (John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1999, \$40).

Flourless Bittersweet

Chocolate Cake with

Milk Chocolate Drizzle

12 ounces bittersweet chocolate, coarsely chopped (divided)

1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, cut into 1-inch pieces

2 tablespoons cognac

6 large eggs, separated, at room temperature

1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons granulated sugar (divided)

1/3 cup whipping cream

2 tablespoons honey

1/3 cup seedless raspberry preserves

3 ounces milk chocolate, melted, for garnish

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Butter bottom and sides of 9-inch springform pan. Line bottom of pan with round of parchment or waxed paper; butter the paper.

In medium saucepan, combine 8 ounces chocolate and the butter. Cook over low heat, stirring constantly with wooden spoon, until chocolate and butter are melted. Gently whisk until smooth. Remove from heat and stir in cognac. Let cool.

In medium bowl, whisk together egg yolks and 1/2 cup sugar until well blended. Stir in chocolate mixture.

In heavy-duty electric mixture, using wire whip attachment, beat egg whites at medium speed until frothy. Increase speed to medium-high and beat egg whites until soft peaks start to form. One tablespoon at a time, beat in remaining two tablespoons of sugar. Continue beating until egg whites are stiff, but not dry.

Using spatula, fold beaten egg whites into chocolate mixture. Do not overmix. Pour batter into prepared pan. Bake in preheated oven until cake is puffed, and toothpick inserted into center comes out with moist crumbs attached, about 30 minutes. Transfer pan to wire rack and cool 10 minutes.

Using small, sharp knife, cut around sides of cake to loosen it. Release pan side. Invert cake onto wire rack. Peel off parchment paper, and cool cake completely. Wrap in plastic and refrigerate overnight.

To make glaze: Place remaining 4 ounces chocolate in medium bowl. In small saucepan, bring cream to gentle boil. Stir in honey. Pour hot cream mixture over chocolate, and let mixture stand for 30 seconds to melt chocolate. Whisk until smooth. Cover surface of glaze with plastic wrap, and set aside at room temperature for 30 minutes or until slightly thickened.

To assemble cake: Remove cake from refrigerator and remove plastic wrap. Place cake on wire rack set over baking sheet. Using metal spatula, spread raspberry preserves evenly over tops and sides of cake. Pour chocolate glaze over cake, covering it completely; spread evenly with a metal spatula. Drizzle top of glazed cake with melted milk chocolate. Serve cake immediately,

or refrigerate. Makes 10 to 12 servings.

This last recipe is from "Jill Prescott's Ecole de Cuisine" cookbook, which will be published early in 2001.

Warm Chocolate Tart

Shiny chocolate icing (see recipe)

16 ounces bittersweet chocolate, finely chopped

1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, cut into 8 pieces

12 egg yolks

2/3 cup sugar (divided)

5 egg whites

1/2 teaspoon cream of tartar

Powdered sugar and unsweetened cocoa powder for decoration

Prepare shiny chocolate icing. Chill, then scoop into 1 1/2 teaspoon-sized balls; freeze.

Prepare tart tins or ramekins by coating with vegetable oil spray, dusting with flour, then lining with parchment paper. Or, use non-stick muffin tins or non-stick tart pans. Preheat oven to 450 degrees.

Place chocolate and butter in small saucepan over low heat, stirring occasionally, until mixture begins to melt. Remove from heat and stir until chocolate is melted. Set aside.

Using hand or mixer whisk, beat yolks with all but one tablespoon of sugar. Beat until mixture is pale yellow in color and you can write your initial on top of mixture with beater, and it remains for a split second (known as leaving ribbons). Fold in warm chocolate mixture. It is important chocolate mixture is just lukewarm so it blends well with yolks.

In separate bowl, using hand or mixer whisk, beat egg whites for 1 minute to break them up. Add cream of tartar. Whisk just until mixture begins to pull away from sides of bowl and soft peaks form. Add remaining 1 tablespoon sugar and whisk an additional 30 to 60 seconds until whites are glossy and hold a peak that is stiffer, holds its shape and has a slight curl at end when mixture is lifted. Begin adding whites by folding in large dollop into chocolate mixture to lighten it. Fold in remaining whites in three portions. Fill prepared pans about a third of the way up, put in a chocolate ball, then fill to 2/3 full. Place tart tins on a baking sheet. Bake in preheated oven about 5 to 6 minutes. Center will be slightly wobbly, not dry. Size of container and materials it is made of are all variables in baking time.

Allow tarts to cool on a wire rack for 5 minutes before unmolding. Tip tart tin upside down onto dessert plate. Sprinkle lightly with powdered sugar. Cake may be decorated with additional melted shiny icing drizzled lightly or by lightly sprinkling cocoa powder. Makes about 10 tarts.

Shiny chocolate icing:

7 ounces bittersweet chocolate, finely chopped

2/3 cup whipping cream

7 tablespoons clarified butter

Place chocolate in small saucepan.

In another saucepan, heat cream until just warm, not boiling. Pour over chocolate, and whisk gently, just to melt chocolate. If there are chunks of chocolate that do not melt, place mixture over very low heat to melt remaining chunks. Add butter and whisk.

Note: Clarified butter is made by melting butter and skimming bubbly white part off. Bubbly white part is fat, and when you remove that portion, butter is a clear, yellow liquid.

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