



# Crackly, Creamy Crème Brûlée

**I** TAKE PRIDE IN MY DESSERTS: twelve-layer Dobosh torte crowned with caramel fans, chocolate mousse cake decorated with chocolate holly leaves for Christmas, lemon cheesecake with a mirror-like lemon glaze. Not to boast, but I can bake. The perfect custard, however, eludes me (I can't make a good pie crust either, but we'll save that for another column).

Since I'm custard-challenged, coconut cream pie, *real* banana pudding, and éclairs are not part of my dessert repertoire; I have some easy "cheaters" recipes, but if I want the real thing, I have to go to a restaurant.

Needless to say, I'm an utter failure when it comes to crème brûlée. The literal translation of this rich dessert is "burnt cream," aptly named in my case, since I invariably scorch the cream or scramble the eggs.

#### PURIST OR RENEGADE?

Pastry chefs are divided into two camps when it comes to crème brûlée – purists and renegades. Purists, such as Frenchman Lil Lacassagne, owner of Saint Jacques restaurant, are looking for the clearest, cleanest, most authentic but not overpowering flavors. Many even eschew the addition of vanilla.

Renegades know no such limitations, boldly adding lavender, green tea, peanut butter, cardamom, banana, jasmine, even Butterfinger candy bars. But is it still crème brûlée when you add Butterfinger candy bars? I asked Herons' Pastry Chef Daniel Benjamin.

Benjamin is a purist, although not necessarily a huge fan of the dessert, which he personally finds a little too cloying. "My philosophy is there are certain things you can fool around with. It's not religious pastry, it's not going to save anyone's life, but certain things have been invented and trying to make them better really takes them down a notch."

The problem with "simple" desserts like crème brûlée is that everything must be perfect; cream, milk, egg yolks, sugar and vanilla beans should all be good quality and fresh. There's a lot that can go wrong: if you don't torch the sugar correctly, you'll burn the top layer of custard, if you make the sugar too thick you get what Benjamin calls the Jolly Rancher effect in your teeth. The topping should be thick enough so that it crackles when you tap your spoon into it and the texture must be thick but not too thick. "Also, I was taught that when it's black [the

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caramel], it's cooked," says Benjamin. "Once the color of the caramel gets to the right point, it gets some more interesting tasting notes."

By this point, I'm overwhelmed and ready to order the dessert online and pass it off as my own. How could something so simple be so hard? Is it really something that only a classically trained pastry chef should tackle? Who came up with this dessert, anyway?

#### THE ORIGIN DEBATE

My friend Lil explained that the origin of the dessert is hotly disputed. Although Trinity College in Cambridge, England claims to have first made the dessert in the 1600's; food historians generally agree that custard itself, as we recognize it today, dates to the Middle Ages. The Spanish have a similar dessert they called Crema Catalana and claim to have invented it in the 18th century. It was not until the 19th century that the

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French translation of "burnt cream" or crème brûlée came into popular culture, causing many to believe that the dessert is uniquely French in origin.

I was crushed when Lil informed me that in France, the true requisite for reaching the level of grandmother (the most important person of any French family) is to succeed in crème brûlée preparation. My four grandkids don't really care if I make crème brûlée or not, but suddenly I felt like a failure; my role as matriarch of the family was at stake. Clearly, something had to be done.

### CRÈME BRÛLÉE by Kathy Edwards, JK's

#### Ingredients:

2 cups heavy cream  
2 cups half and half  
1 vanilla bean, split and insides scraped out

14 large egg yolks (9 oz.)  
1 cup granulated sugar  
1 ½ Tbsp. Myers Rum

8 ramekins, preferably oval

#### Method:

Combine cream and half and half in a non-aluminum pot. Split vanilla bean lengthwise and scrape the seeds into the mixture, then toss the pod into the pan and heat mixture just until it "smiles" or gets wrinkly on top. Remove the pod.

While mixture is heating, whisk together egg yolks and sugar, beating until yolks turn pale and a ribbon forms when you lift whisk, making sure sugar is well incorporated.

Whisk the heated cream mixture into egg yolk/sugar mixture and strain through a fine mesh strainer. Stir in rum. Cool in an ice bath for 30 minutes. Place individual ramekins on a sheet pan or jelly roll pan and portion custard into ramekins, almost to the edge. Pour enough water into pan to reach 1/3 of the way up sides of ramekins. Place in oven and bake at 300° for approximately 45 minutes or until set. Remove from oven and cool. Refrigerate at least six hours until completely cool in center.

Quickly run each dish under running water; shaking off excess. One at a time, pour ¼ cup of sugar on top of custard; shake to cover and pour off excess sugar. Torch until sugar just begins to melt. Repeat sugar process and torch again, beginning at outer edge first and working towards center, until dark amber in color. Repeat with remaining ramekins. Serves 8

### TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

I decided to enlist the aid of Kathy Edwards, pastry chef at JK's in North Hills and she offered to give me a cooking lesson. The best thing about Kathy's recipe is the custard isn't cooked on top of the stove, so I wouldn't have to worry about scrambling the eggs. My challenge was to avoid scorching the cream. That I could handle.

Kathy explained that having the proper equipment is essential: a heavy, non-reactive saucepan, a chinoise or very fine mesh strainer to help get that smooth texture, and then the final tool – the Burnzamtic TS 4000 torch with a 16 oz. propane tank. One look at that bad boy and I began imitating the sound Tim Allen makes when he pulls out a power tool. But really, couldn't I just run it under the broiler? Apparently broilers are too uneven and although you can buy one of those cute little kitchen torches, for roughly the same price you can pull out the big guns and impress your husband. My husband was highly in favor of spending the money – anything to build up his arsenal of testosterone-ish equipment.

We've scaled down the recipe Kathy and I made (I think we cracked something like 54 eggs that morning) and included tips to make the whole process easier, but I'm sure there's still a bunch of you rolling your eyes and wondering when you'd ever have time to whip up a batch of crème brûlée.

No excuses; you can make it ahead of time – way ahead of time. The uncooked mixture will hold for 10 days in the refrigerator, just give it a whisk now and then. Baked, the custards will hold up to a week, refrigerated. All you have to do is shake some sugar over the top and fire away.

### A SIGNATURE TOUCH

Once you've mastered the basics, you can probably come up with your own variations; even the purists can't resist adding their own signature touch. Edwards adds a dash of Myers Rum. Daniel Benjamin prefers to make crème brûlée's Spanish cousin, Crema Catalana. Cooked on the stove instead of in an oven, made with milk rather than cream and thickened with cornstarch, it has a velvety texture. "It's traditionally flavored with lemon peel and cinnamon," says Benjamin, who was inspired to make it after a vacation in Portugal. He "South-





Chef Kathy Edwards, JK's

ernizes" the dessert by adding a bottom layer of peaches, which he roasts to bring out their flavor.

Riviera's sous chef Peter Susca says that when his standard crème brûlée sales slacked off, he began to experiment with new flavors. "Customers seemed to have gotten bored with it, so I started changing it up. Now it's one of our most popular items."

Mint chocolate chip is Riviera's most popular flavor; Susca adds crème de menthe, fresh mint and chocolate chips. Cappuccino crème brûlée, topped with toasted meringue and served in a cappuccino cup is a showstopper and his "apple

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pie" never fails to get a recipe request. When he wants to crank up the temperature, he puts a hot tamale version on the menu, made with Red Hots candy.

I keep the basic ingredients on hand these days, so now whenever I get a craving for my favorite dessert; I pull out my trusty Burnzamtic TS 4000 and tell those custard devils who's the boss. Forget the pie this Thanksgiving. Even though I'm a purist, I'm making pumpkin crème brûlée. |

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### CREATE THE PERFECT CRÈME BRÛLÉE

Kathy's trick: Refrigerating the baked ramekins produces condensation, which aids in the proper caramelizing of the sugar. Once when Kathy was short on time, she ran water over the ramekins to help make the sugar stick. It worked so well she was stunned; then she remembered her high school science class and a little theory called specific gravity. The little molecules between the sugar and the custard had created a barrier that allowed her the thickness of the sugar she wanted and prevented the custard from burning when she torched it.

Vanilla Beans – make sure they're fresh; they should be soft and waxy. If they're dry and brittle they will be hard to split open. Store in air-tight container; not in the refrigerator. Since they are so expensive, one way to get the most for your money is after steeping and straining the pods, rinse and dry them and put in a container of sugar to make vanilla sugar for baking.

Sugar will cook an egg yolk if it's not incorporated quickly enough. Don't just dump the yolks into the sugar and walk away.

No need for expensive or exotic sugar, plain old granulated works just fine.

Don't torch on butcher block or other surface that is flammable – use a sheet pan to avoid scorching the surface.

When you separate the eggs make sure to remove all traces of the egg white. Even a few drops of white in the yolks can produce lumpy custard.

Let the tops harden for about three minutes before serving.

Torch can be used for baked Alaska, meringue pies, melting cheese and browning many other foods.

The best test for doneness is the so-called "wobble" test: as the ramekins cook, carefully reach in the oven and gently shake one with tongs or an oven mitt. It's perfect when the edges are set but the rest of the custard jiggles like Jell-O. Cooking the custards past this point will lead to a harder, pastier consistency.

Without a torch, use the oven's broiler setting to caramelize the sugar. Broil for 20 to 30 seconds within at least an inch of the flame or heating element.