

SWEET

Continued from Page 1B

A syrup of strawberries and sugar form the base, which is then enriched with egg yolks and sugar gently cooked with the syrup in a double boiler. Whipped cream is then folded into the mix, making it frothy and light, and giving it structure. Once frozen, it becomes smooth and rich; it shimmers on your tongue.

I next made a strawberry panachée, which looks like a parfait, but I guess “panachée” has more panache. By either name, it’s awfully good.

Part of the pleasure is its visual appeal; it should be served in a wine glass so you can see the layers. On the bottom is a crushed shortbread cookie, which guarantees that the dessert is on the right track. On top of that, and sinking into it, is a layer of pureed strawberries mixed with sliced strawberries and a little jam.

On top of that is a beautiful white layer of crème fraîche or sour cream, which is then topped by one last layer of the strawberry puree and strawberries.

It looks too pretty to eat. But not eating it would kind of miss the whole purpose of dessert.

My final strawberry dessert comes to us from chef Wolfgang Puck: Warm strawberries with baked meringues and vanilla ice cream.

Sounds marvelous, doesn’t it? It is.

The secret to this dish is the sauce that the strawberries are cooked in. With wine, sugar, lemon juice, orange zest, orange juice and licorice-scented star anise, it almost smells like mulled wine while it cooks.

That’s the unexpected dimension to the recipe, the bright berries simmered with comforting spices. The rest is just your standard impressive dessert, with vanilla ice cream sandwiched between discs of crispy homemade meringue.

It would be great even without the strawberries. But strawberries are in season, and they make everything better.

FROZEN STRAWBERRY SOUFFLÉ

Yield: 8 or 10 servings

3 cups sliced strawberries
1 1/4 cups plus 3 tablespoons granulated sugar, divided
3 egg yolks
2 tablespoons framboise, mirabelle, kirsch or other white spirit, optional
1 1/2 cups heavy cream
3 or 4 whole and/or sliced strawberries for garnish

1. Blend the strawberries and 1/2 cup of the sugar in a skillet. Cook, stirring occasionally, until sugar and the liquid from the berries thicken, about 10 minutes. Remove and let cool thoroughly.

2. Set up a double boiler or select a 2-quart metal mixing bowl that will fit snugly inside a larger saucepan. Add about 2 inches of water to the saucepan (use less if the mixing bowl will touch the water when it sits in the saucepan). Bring water to a simmer; do not yet insert the top bowl or pan.

3. To the mixing bowl or top of the double boiler add the egg yolks and 3/4 cup of the sugar and beat vigorously and thoroughly with a wire whisk or portable electric mixer,



A strawberry tart.

Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS



Frozen strawberry soufflé, made with fresh strawberries.

Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

making certain to scrape around the inside of the bowl with the beater.

4. Fit the mixing bowl or top part of the double boiler inside the saucepan and continue beating. Beat for a few minutes until yolks are quite thick and pale yellow. Beat in the framboise, if using. Add the berry mixture and fold in. Chill thoroughly.

5. Whip 1 cup of the cream until stiff and fold in 2 tablespoons of the sugar. Fold this into the strawberry mixture.

6. Chill a 6- to 7-cup soufflé dish in the freezer.

7. Neatly tie a “collar” made of wax paper or aluminum foil around the soufflé dish. The top of the paper or foil should extend about 2 inches above the top of the dish.

8. Pour the soufflé mixture into the dish. Place in the freezer and let stand overnight.

9. Whip the remaining 1/2 cup of the cream. Beat in the remaining 1 tablespoon of the sugar. If desired, outfit a pastry bag with a star tube and pipe the cream around the top in a fancy pattern. Decorate with whole and/or sliced strawberries.

Per serving: 266 calories; 10 g fat; 6 g saturated fat; 95 mg cholesterol; 2 g protein; 40 g carbohydrate; 38 g sugar; 1 g fiber; 11 mg sodium; 34 mg calcium

— Recipe from “Craig Claiborne’s the New New York Times Cook Book” by Craig Claiborne and Pierre Franey

WARM STRAWBERRIES WITH BAKED MERINGUES AND VANILLA ICE CREAM

Yield: 6 servings

For the meringues
2 large egg whites, room temperature
1/8 teaspoon cream of tartar
1/2 cup superfine sugar, see note

For the strawberry sauce
1 pound fresh ripe strawberries, hulled
1/2 cup dry white wine
1/3 cup granulated sugar
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
1/2 teaspoon grated orange zest
1/3 cup fresh orange juice
1 whole star anise

For the final presentation
1 1/2 pints good-quality vanilla ice cream
1/2 cup cold heavy cream (or premade whipped cream)
1/2 pound strawberries, hulled and cut into quarters, plus 6 for garnish
Fresh mint sprigs for garnish

Note: To make superfine sugar, place granulated sugar in a blender and mix on medium to high speed for 10 seconds. Leftover superfine sugar can be stored in an airtight container indefinitely.

1. Make the meringue discs: Preheat the oven to 225 degrees. Place racks in upper and lower thirds of oven. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper. Using a glass, jar or bowl as your guide, draw 6 circles on each sheet, each circle about 3 1/2 inches (or smaller) in diameter. Turn the paper over; you should still be able to see the circles.

2. In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, or in a large stainless steel bowl with a handheld beater, beat the egg whites on medium speed until they begin to foam. Add the

cream of tartar and 1 tablespoon of the sugar and continue to whip the egg whites at medium-low speed until they form soft, slightly dropping peaks when the beaters are lifted out.

3. Turn the speed to medium-high and continue to whip the egg whites as you gradually add the superfine sugar 1 tablespoon at a time. Beat until the meringue is shiny and holds stiff, upright peaks when the beaters are lifted out. Take care not to overbeat.

4. Drop spoonfuls of the meringue onto the circles on the parchment and use an offset spatula to spread them into even circles 1/4- to 1/2-inch thick.

5. Bake the meringue discs in the oven for 1 1/2 hours. Remove one disc and test for doneness; it should be stiff and crisp in the middle. If it is moist, bake for 30 more minutes. Turn off the oven and leave the meringues inside for 1 hour more. Remove meringues from the oven and, when they are completely cool, pack them carefully (they are fragile) in an airtight container and store at room temperature until ready to use. Crisp, dry meringues will keep for several weeks in an airtight container.

6. Make the strawberry sauce: Combine the strawberries, wine, sugar, lemon juice, orange zest, orange juice and star anise in a medium, nonreactive saucepan. Over medium-high heat, bring to a boil, stirring occasionally, then reduce the heat and simmer for 5 minutes. Remove from heat, cover and let the ingredients steep for 10 to 15 minutes.

7. Remove and discard the star anise and transfer the mixture to a blender. Blend until smooth. Place a fine-mesh strainer over a nonreactive bowl and, using a rubber spatula, press the purée through the strainer. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and refrigerate until ready to use.

8. For the final presentation: If whipping your own cream, whip the cream in a chilled mixing bowl with a chilled whisk or a handheld mixer with chilled beaters. Beat at medium-high speed until soft peaks form. Set aside.

9. Pour the sauce in a medium saucepan. Over medium-high heat, bring it back to a boil, lower the heat and simmer until it thickens slightly. Gently stir in the hulled, quartered berries and cook until just heated through but still firm, about 3 minutes more.

10. Place a meringue disc on each of 6 dessert plates. Top each disc with a scoop of ice cream. Spoon the sauce

with the berries around the ice cream and meringue. Top with another meringue disc. Garnish with whipped cream, strawberries and mint sprigs. Serve immediately.

Per serving: 405 calories; 18 g fat; 12 g saturated fat; 93 mg cholesterol; 6 g protein; 56 g carbohydrate; 52 g sugar; 2 g fiber; 80 mg sodium; 130 mg calcium

— Adapted from “Wolfgang Puck Makes it Easy” by Wolfgang Puck

STRAWBERRIES DUSTED WITH CARDAMOM SUGAR

Yield: 6 servings

1/4 cup orange liqueur, such as Grand Marnier or Cointreau
2 (16-ounce) containers strawberries, hulled, left whole
1/2 cup granulated sugar
1/2 teaspoon ground cardamom
Fresh mint sprigs, optional

1. Pour Grand Marnier into large bowl. Add strawberries to bowl and toss to coat. Whisk sugar and cardamom in small bowl to blend. Spread cardamom sugar on small rimmed baking sheet.

Using slotted spoon and working in batches, transfer strawberries to baking sheet with cardamom sugar. Roll in sugar to coat well.

2. Divide strawberries among 6 wine glasses. Pour any remaining Grand Marnier from bowl over berries. Can be prepared up to 2 hours before serving; cover and chill. Garnish with mint sprigs, if desired.

Per serving: 120 calories; 1 g fat; no saturated fat; no cholesterol; 1 g protein; 30 g carbohydrate; 25 g sugar; 3 g fiber; 2 mg sodium; 25 mg calcium

— Recipe from “The Bon Appétit Cookbook” by Barbara Fairchild

STRAWBERRY PANACHÉE

Yield: 4 servings

2 1/2 cups ripe strawberries
1/4 cup jam (strawberry, raspberry or currant are good)
4 shortbread cookies
3/4 cup crème fraîche or 3/4 cup sour cream mixed with 1/4 cup heavy cream
4 sprigs fresh mint or basil

1. Cut off the bottom and top of each berry (you should have about 1 1/4 cups of tops and bottoms). Slice the centers of the berries and set aside. Push the berry tops and bottoms and the jam through a food mill or mini food processor until puréed. Mix the sliced berries into the purée, and refrigerate until ready to serve.

2. At serving time, put the cookies in a plastic bag and crush them coarsely with a rolling pin. Divide the crumbs among 4 glass bowls or goblets. Spoon about half of the berry mixture on top of the cookies. Stir the crème fraîche or sour cream to loosen it and spoon on top of the berries. Top with the remaining berry mixture. Garnish each with

a mint sprig and, if you like, pass some crème fraîche or sour cream.

Per serving: 310 calories; 20 g fat; 12 g saturated fat; 60 mg cholesterol; 3 g protein; 30 g carbohydrate; 19 g sugar; 2 g fiber; 64 mg sodium; 20 mg calcium

— Adapted from “Fast Food My Way” by Jacques Pepin

STRAWBERRY TART

Yield: 8 to 10 servings

Dough for 10-inch tart (store-bought or your favorite recipe)

1 cup milk
1/3 cup granulated sugar
3 egg yolks
2 tablespoons cornstarch
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
3 pints firm, fresh, red, ripe strawberries, hulled, rinsed and drained
2/3 cup orange marmalade
2 teaspoons water
1/4 cup sliced almonds, toasted, see note

Note: To toast almonds, place in a skillet over medium heat. Stir and toss frequently until almond slices become a golden brown; they burn easily, so remove to a plate as soon as any of the slices becomes a dark brown, even if others are not yet golden.

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

2. Roll out dough into a 10-inch tart pan; trim any excess. Prick all over with a fork. Place a piece of parchment paper or aluminum foil inside the crust and weigh down with pie weights, dry beans or uncooked rice. Bake 20 minutes. Remove parchment or foil and pie weights, return to oven and bake 10 more minutes or until golden brown (cover rim with foil if it begins to burn). Remove to a wire rack and allow to cool completely.

3. Heat the milk in a small saucepan until small bubbles form around the edge. Remove from heat and cover to keep hot.

4. Put the sugar and yolks in a mixing bowl or mixer and beat with a wire whisk or whisk attachment until the mixture is a golden yellow and forms a ribbon — when the whisk is lifted from the mixture, the excess will fall back onto the surface in what briefly resembles a ribbon. Using the whisk, stir in the cornstarch.

5. Slowly pour the hot milk into the egg-and-sugar mixture, beating constantly with the whisk. Return the mixture to the saucepan and bring to a boil, stirring constantly with the whisk. Cook for 1 minute, stirring vigorously. Remove from the heat and stir in the vanilla extract. If not using immediately, cover the surface with plastic wrap to keep a skin from forming.

6. Spoon the crème pâtissière (the egg-sugar-milk mixture) into the tart shell and smooth it over. Arrange the strawberries, bottom-side down, close together and symmetrically over the crème pâtissière.

See Sweet / Page 3B

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