

CARAMEL PECAN CAKES

MAKES 8 INDIVIDUAL CAKES

ACTIVE TIME: 35 MIN START TO FINISH: 2½ HR
(PLUS 1 DAY FOR CHILLING BATTER; OPTIONAL)

These individual cakes, from Lantern pastry chef Monica Segovia-Welsh, are moist, tender, and not remotely fussy. If you don't want to fool with the suggested accompaniments, serve the cakes with a dollop of whipped cream instead.

FOR CARAMEL

2 cups sugar
1½ cups water, divided

FOR CAKE

½ cup pecans
½ stick unsalted butter, melted
1 large egg, lightly beaten
⅓ cup heavy cream
1¼ cups all-purpose flour
½ tsp baking soda
½ tsp salt
¼ cup granulated sugar
¼ cup packed brown sugar

EQUIPMENT: 8 (6-oz) ramekins

ACCOMPANIMENT: five-spice ice cream and poached tangerine slices
(recipes follow)

MAKE CARAMEL: Bring sugar and ½ cup water to a boil in a 12-inch heavy skillet over medium heat, stirring until sugar has dissolved, then wash down any sugar crystals on side of skillet with a pastry brush dipped in cold water. Boil, without stirring, swirling skillet occasionally so caramel colors evenly, until dark amber. Remove from heat and carefully stir in remaining cup water (mixture will steam vigorously and may stiffen). Return to a boil and stir until caramel has completely dissolved. If necessary, simmer until just syrupy, 1 to 3 minutes. Cool to room temperature.

TOAST PECANS FOR CAKE: Preheat oven to 350°F with rack in middle.

► Toast pecans in a 4-sided sheet pan in oven until fragrant and a shade darker, 8 to 10 minutes. Cool and coarsely chop.

MAKE CAKE: Put ⅔ cup cooled caramel syrup in a bowl (save remainder to use as sauce) and add butter, egg, and cream, whisking well after each addition.

► Sift together flour, baking soda, salt, and sugars into a large bowl. Make a well in center, then add caramel mixture and gradually whisk in dry ingredients until smooth. Fold in pecans. Chill, covered, until cold (or 12 to 24 hours for best results).

► Preheat oven to 325°F with rack in middle.

► Butter and lightly flour ramekins, then cut out and fit a round of parchment paper in bottom of each. Arrange in a 4-sided sheet pan.

► Divide batter among ramekins (about ¼ cup each; batter will be stiff). Bake until cakes just spring back when lightly pressed, 30 to 35 minutes. Cool cakes to warm. Reheat remaining caramel.

Invert cakes onto plates, then peel off parchment and spoon some of caramel on top.

COOKS' NOTE: Cakes can be made 4 hours ahead. Rewarm, individually wrapped in foil, in a 300°F oven.

FIVE-SPICE ICE CREAM

MAKES ABOUT 1½ QT

ACTIVE TIME: 20 MIN START TO FINISH: 6¾ HR

We were enchanted by Segovia-Welsh's idea of cold ice cream flavored with "warming" spices such as those found in the fragrant Chinese blend called five-spice powder. It turns the honest little caramel pecan cakes (recipe precedes) into something suave.

3 (2-inch) pieces dried tangerine peel

(see cooks' note, below)

2 tsp black peppercorns

1 tsp pink peppercorns

1 whole star anise

½ tsp whole cloves

½ tsp whole allspice

2 cups heavy cream

2 cups whole milk

1 cup sugar, divided

1 vanilla bean, split lengthwise

1 whole large egg

8 large egg yolks

1 Tbsp dark rum

¼ tsp kosher salt

EQUIPMENT: an electric coffee/spice grinder; an ice cream maker

► Tear tangerine peel into pieces. Pulse peppercorns, star anise, cloves, and allspice to a coarse mixture in grinder.

► Combine cream, milk, tangerine peel, spices, and ½ cup sugar in a heavy medium saucepan. With tip of a paring knife, scrape seeds from vanilla bean into cream mixture, then drop in pod. Bring mixture just to a boil over medium heat. Remove from heat and let steep, covered, 20 minutes.

► Bring spiced milk to a simmer, then strain through a fine-mesh sieve into a bowl, discarding spices and peel. Return to saucepan.

► Whisk whole egg and yolks with remaining ½ cup sugar in bowl until pale, then add hot spiced milk in a slow stream, whisking. Return to saucepan and cook, stirring with a wooden spoon, until mixture coats back of spoon and registers 170 to 175°F on an instant-read thermometer (do not let boil). Immediately strain custard through fine-mesh sieve into a bowl, then whisk in rum and kosher salt.

► Chill custard at least 6 hours, then freeze in ice cream maker.

COOKS' NOTES: If you can't find dried tangerine peel, prepare your own by completely drying pieces of peel on a rack at dry room temperature, 4 to 5 days.

• Custard can be chilled up to 1 day.

• Ice cream can be made 1 week ahead.

POACHED TANGERINE SLICES

SERVES 8

ACTIVE TIME: 15 MIN START TO FINISH: 1¾ HR

The last embellishment for the caramel pecan cakes (this page) is easy to make and adds beautiful brightness to the plate.

4 tight-skinned tangerines, satsumas, or mandarin oranges

1½ cups sugar

3 cups water

¼ cup dry white wine

¼ cup fresh lemon juice

► Preheat oven to 325°F with rack in middle.

► Slice tangerines (including peel) crosswise about ¼ inch thick. Remove and discard any seeds, then arrange tangerines in a 13- by 9-inch baking dish, overlapping if necessary.

► Bring sugar and water to a boil in a small saucepan, stirring occasionally, then simmer 2 minutes. Stir in wine and lemon juice and return to a simmer. Pour over fruit.

► Lay a sheet of parchment paper directly over fruit to keep submerged, then poach in oven until tender but not falling apart, 1 to 1½ hours. Discard parchment and cool fruit to warm or room temperature.

COOKS' NOTE: Tangerines can be poached 3 days ahead and chilled in syrup. Bring to room temperature before serving.