

Soufflé

A hallmark of French cooking, the soufflé is like magic. It uses nothing more than air to transform workaday eggs into a lofty masterpiece, puffing and browning in the oven before collapsing at first bite.



WHY MASTER IT?

IN "MASTERING THE ART of French Cooking," their profoundly influential 1961 cookbook, Julia Child, Simone Beck and Louisette Bertholle describe the soufflé as the "epitome and triumph of the art of French cooking." Decades later, the soufflé remains as vital as ever, as successive generations of chefs revisit and refresh the classic recipe.

A soufflé has two main components, a flavorful base and glossy beaten egg whites, and they are gently folded together just before baking. The word itself comes from "souffler," meaning "to breathe" or "to puff," which is what the whites do to the base once they hit the oven's heat.

The base may be made either savory or sweet. Savory soufflés usually incorporate cheese, vegetables, meat or seafood and are appropriate for a light dinner or lunch, or as a first course. They require a substantial and stable base, in the form of a cooked sauce that often involves butter, egg yolks and some kind of starch (flour, rice or cornstarch). Sweet soufflés, with fruit, chocolate or liquors, make spectacular desserts. The base can be made from a fruit purée, or a sweet, rich sauce.

Soufflés are found all over France, with each region applying its own spin. In Alsace, cooks use kirsch. In Provence, goat cheese or eggplant are excellent additions. And naturally, Roquefort cheese is a popular addition in Roquefort.

TECHNIQUES AND TIPS

Beating and Folding the Whites

- Well-beaten, stable whites are the key to a gorgeously puffy soufflé. So don't rush this step. The slower you go, the better your chances for success.
- Always use eggs at room temperature or even warm, for the highest rise. Cold egg whites won't beat up as loftily. To bring cold eggs to temperature quickly, soak them in their shells in warm water for 20 minutes.
- Make sure your hands are clean. If there is any trace of oil or grease on them and you touch the egg whites, the soufflé may not puff. Also take a moment to check that there are no traces of yolk or fat in the egg whites or the bowl. (Egg yolk will impede the whites from frothing.)
- Adding a bit of acid (in our recipes, cream of tartar) helps stabilize the egg foam and prevent overbeating. Beating the whites in a copper bowl will produce a similar result without the added acid, which is why copper bowls were historically considered essential for making meringues.
- You will achieve better results beating the whites in a metal mixing bowl rather than plastic, glass or ceramic. Plastic can retain oily residue, and

glass and ceramic are slippery, making it harder to get the whites to cling and climb up the sides. This is especially important if beating by hand. Stainless steel or copper work best.

- If you are using an electric mixer, check the bottom of the bowl every now and then for unbeaten egg whites. Sometimes the whites pool there, and when you go to incorporate the meringue into the base, those whites will deflate the overall soufflé. Whisk any pooled whites by hand into the rest of the meringue and continue beating with the machine.
- Beat until the meringue is just able to hold stiff peaks. This means that when you lift the whisk out of the meringue, it will create a little cowlick that stays upright without drooping as you gently move the whisk. It should look glossy, or be just starting to lose its shine. Don't overbeat (which will make the foam turn grainy and dry) or underbeat (which won't give the proper lift). If you overbeat your whites, you may be able to rescue them by beating in another egg white. This often restores them.
- After the whites are properly beaten, you will fold them into the base. The goal is to incorporate the whites without losing volume. Begin by whisking



GATHERING THE INGREDIENTS.

a quarter of the meringue into the base. This lightens the base, making it easier to fold in the rest of the meringue mixture. Then fold in a C shape: Starting in the middle of the bowl, drag the thin edge of a spatula down like a knife, then tilt and scoop up a spatula full of the soufflé base, making sure to scrape the bottom of the bowl. Turn the batter over, away from your body, back into the middle of the bowl. Shift the bowl 45 degrees, and repeat.

■ Stop folding when the streaks of white have just disappeared — or rather, when they have almost disappeared. A few white streaks are preferable to overfolding, which deflates the batter.

Gruyère and Chive Soufflé

TIME: 50 MINUTES
YIELD: 6 SERVINGS

3 tablespoons/42 grams unsalted butter, plus more for coating dish
5 tablespoons/25 grams finely grated Parmesan cheese
1 cup whole milk
3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon paprika
1/2 teaspoon fine sea salt
Pinch ground nutmeg
4 large egg yolks
5 large egg whites
1/2 teaspoon cream of tartar
1 cup/115 grams coarsely grated Gruyère cheese
2 tablespoons chopped chives

1. Remove wire racks from oven and place a baking sheet directly on oven floor. Heat oven to 400 degrees. Generously butter a 1 1/2-quart soufflé dish. Coat bottom and sides with 3 tablespoons/15 grams Parmesan, tapping out any excess.
2. In a small pot, heat milk until steaming. Meanwhile, melt butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Whisk in flour and cook until the mixture foams, about 3 minutes. Remove from heat and whisk in warm milk. Return to heat and cook until thickened, whisking constantly, about 3 minutes.
3. Remove from heat and whisk in paprika, salt and nutmeg. Whisk in egg yolks one at a time, blending fully after each addition. Transfer flour and yolk mixture to a large bowl.
4. Using an electric mixer, beat egg whites and cream of tartar at medium speed until the mixture holds stiff peaks.
5. Whisk a quarter of the whites into the lukewarm yolk mixture to lighten. Gently fold in remaining whites in 2 additions while gradually sprinkling in Gruyère cheese, remaining 2 tablespoons Parmesan and the chives. Transfer batter to prepared dish. Rub your thumb around the inside edge of the dish to create a 1/4-inch or so space between the dish and the soufflé mixture.
6. Transfer dish to baking sheet in the oven and reduce oven temperature to 375 degrees. Bake until soufflé is puffed and golden brown on top and center barely moves when dish is shaken gently, about 30 minutes. (Do not open oven door during first 20 minutes.) Serve immediately.

Bittersweet Chocolate Soufflé

TIME: 45 MINUTES
YIELD: 6 SERVINGS

1/2 cup/114 grams unsalted butter (1 stick), softened, plus more for coating dish
4 tablespoons/50 grams granulated sugar, plus more for coating dish
8 ounces/225 grams bittersweet chocolate (60 to 65 percent cacao), finely chopped
6 eggs, separated, at room temperature
Pinch fine sea salt
1/2 teaspoon cream of tartar

1. Remove wire racks from oven and place a baking sheet directly on oven floor. Heat oven to 400 degrees. Generously butter a 1 1/2-quart soufflé dish. Coat bottom and sides thoroughly with sugar, tapping out excess. For the best rise, make sure there is sugar covering all the butter on the sides of the dish.
2. In a medium bowl, melt chocolate and butter either in the microwave or in a bowl over a pot of simmering water. Let cool only slightly (it should still be warm), then whisk in egg yolks and salt.
3. Using an electric mixer, beat egg whites and cream of tartar at medium speed until the mixture is fluffy and holds very soft peaks. Add sugar, 1 tablespoon at a time, beating until whites hold stiff peaks and look glossy.
4. Gently whisk a quarter of the egg whites into the chocolate mixture to lighten it. Fold in remaining whites in two additions, then transfer batter to prepared dish. Rub your thumb around the inside edge of the dish to create about a 1/4-inch space between the dish and the soufflé mixture.
5. Transfer dish to baking sheet in the oven, and reduce oven temperature to 375 degrees. Bake until soufflé is puffed and center moves only slightly when dish is shaken gently, about 25 to 35 minutes. (Do not open oven door during first 20 minutes.) Bake it a little less for a runnier soufflé and a little more for a firmer soufflé. Serve immediately.



FOLDING WHITES INTO THE BASE.

whites to hold onto as they rise.

■ If your soufflé dish isn't big enough

for all of the batter, you can extend it by tying a buttered piece of parchment paper or foil around the rim of the soufflé dish to increase its volume.

■ For individual soufflés, use small

ramekins placed on a rimmed baking sheet so they are easy to get in and out of the oven. Reduce the cooking time of a larger soufflé by about half.

■ Heat matters. Make sure the oven is

preheated; that initial hot blast expands the air trapped inside the bubbly foam of batter, which makes it rise. Having the soufflé base hot or warm when you fold in the egg whites helps the temperature rise quickly, too.

■ Baking the soufflé on a preheated baking sheet on the bottom of the oven helps the soufflé cook on the bottom as



PREPARING TO BAKE THE SOUFFLÉ.

well as the top, producing a more even result. The baking sheet will also catch any overflow.

■ For a higher rise, rub your thumb around the rim of the soufflé dish to create a gap between the dish and the batter. (Many soufflé dishes already have a groove there to help.)

■ If you want a perfectly flat top to your soufflé, level the foam with the back of a knife before baking, and before running your thumb around the edge of the dish. Or you could leave the foam as it is, for a more natural, wavy look. Julia Child preferred a natural top; pastry chefs tend to prefer a flat top.

■ A soufflé is done baking when it has risen above the rim of the dish and is nicely browned on top. It should feel mostly firm and only slightly jiggly

when you lightly tap the top. Flourless soufflés, such as those made with fruit purée or chocolate, are lighter and cook faster. (Chocolate soufflés can also be intentionally underbaked for a gooey chocolate interior. The soufflé should be a tad wiggly when gently shaken but firm around the edges.) Thicker soufflés made with flour, like a cheese soufflé, don't rise as much in the oven, but won't collapse as much either.

■ Use the window of your oven to monitor the soufflé, and don't open the oven door until you see the soufflé puff up over the sides of the dish. Once it has done that, you can safely open the oven and check on it.

■ If the top of your soufflé starts to brown too fast, top it with a round of parchment paper.

■ All soufflés fall within minutes of coming out of the oven. That's their nature, because the hot air bubbles contract when they hit cooler air. That's why you need to serve them immediately after baking. But as long as you haven't overfolded the whites, and don't open the oven door until the last few minutes of baking, your soufflé will rise gloriously before the dramatic and expected collapse.

A BRIEF HISTORY

MARIE-ANTOINE CARÊME, the father of French haute cuisine, is credited with perfecting and popularizing the soufflé, publishing his recipe in "Le Pâtissier Royal Parisien" in 1815. (The first recipe had appeared in 1742, in Vincent La Chapelle's "Le Cuisinier Moderne.") Initially, Carême made his soufflés in stiff pastry casings called croustades that were lined with buttered paper. Soon after, vessels were developed just for making soufflés, deep dishes with straight sides, for the tallest rise. Carême went on to create several variations, including Soufflé Rothschild, named after his employer, one of the richest men in France; it contained candied fruit macerated in a liquor containing flecks of gold. (Contemporary versions substitute more attainable kirsch for the golden elixir.)

As the soufflé evolved, the number of variations grew. By 1903, when Auguste Escoffier published "Le Guide Culinaire," which codified the classic recipes of French cuisine, more than 60 soufflé variations were in common use, with versions that incorporated ingredients as varied as Parmesan cheese, foie gras, escarole, pheasant, violets, almonds and tea. A layered soufflé called a Camargo alternated stripes of tangerine and hazelnut soufflé batters in the same dish. "Mastering the Art of French Cooking," published nearly six decades later, offered several recipes, including a version called Soufflé Vendôme, in which cold poached eggs are layered



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THE MENU AT LE SOUFFLÉ, A RESTAURANT IN PARIS.

into the unbaked soufflé mixture. After baking, the eggs warm up slightly, releasing their runny yolks when the soufflé is broken.

Despite a movement in France in recent years that called for a more experimental take on traditional cuisine, there is still a place for perfect soufflé. And while chefs may innovate upon the classic version, those first 18th-century recipes are still very much in use.