

Stirring Up Memories With Vanilla Pudding

BY BILL DALEY
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Vanilla pudding can bring out the kid in you, especially as it conjures up memories of those huge institutional cans cranked open in summer camp dining halls or the tiny cups your mom would tuck into your school lunchbox.

Part of the appeal of vanilla pudding lies in its simplicity. It personifies the nostalgic flavors of childhood. Yet, vanilla pudding can be a key ingredient in more complicated desserts designed to please adults, treats like tarts and trifles and homemade ice pops.

That's due to the clean, clear flavor you get, especially from homemade versions.

Alice Medrich, a baker and teacher living in Berkeley, Calif., says vanilla pudding serves as a valuable backdrop for other flavors, whether that's a nutmeg-spiced tart shell, a sprinkling of crumbled toffee on top or a spoonful of fresh fruit. Vanilla pudding is also a superb showcase, naturally, for that distinctive vanilla flavor.

"Vanilla pudding is bland in a delicious way," says Medrich, author of "Sinfully Easy Delicious Desserts" (Artisan, \$25.95).

Shaina Olmanson, the Falcon Heights, Minn.-based writer of the "Food for My Family" blog, also zeros in on the "creamy sweetness" of vanilla pudding that puts a period at the end of the meal.

"It's like vanilla ice cream," says Olmanson, author of "Desserts in Jars: 50 Sweet Treats That Shine" (Harvard Common Press, \$16.95). "It's simple, sweet and satisfies the need you have for that last sweet bite."

While vanilla pudding can be a nostalgic reminder for those in the older age groups when parents made real pudding, Medrich says vanilla pudding appeals to all generations today as a delicious, no-fuss dessert. That vanilla pudding can be made without eggs is especially appealing.

"For the new cook or a cook scared of eggs it's easy to make. They don't have to worry about the eggs curdling," she says. Cooks can control the richness by using half-and-half or cream instead of milk, if they want to use a dairy product at all.

"I'm certain, though I haven't done it, you could make vanilla pudding without dairy using coconut or hemp milk," Medrich says, suggesting cooks also experiment with different sugars, like brown or raw.

"The key to vanilla pudding, I think, is to let it shine," Olmanson says. "Use great vanilla. The better the quality the better the taste."

RICH VANILLA PUDDING
Prep: 15 minutes
Cook: 15 minutes
Chill: 1 1/2 hours
Servings: 4 (1/2 cup each)
Note: Tasters found this pudding from Shaina Olmanson's Desserts in Jars to be absolutely delicious.

Ingredients:
1/3 cup granulated sugar
3 tablespoons cornstarch
1/8 teaspoon salt
Vanilla beans scraped from 1 vanilla bean pod
3 egg yolks
2 cups whole milk
2 tablespoons unsalted butter, at room temperature, cut into pieces

1. Whisk together the sugar, cornstarch, salt and vanilla bean seeds in a medium saucepan. Whisk in the egg yolks until well combined. Slowly pour in the milk, whisking to incorporate. Cook over medium-low heat, whisking constantly, until thickened, 10-15 minutes.

2. Remove from the heat; whisk in the butter one piece at a time, making sure each piece is incorporated before adding the next. Cover the top of the pudding with plastic wrap; refrigerate until set, 1 1/2 to 2 hours.

Nutrition information:
Per serving: 254 calories, 13 g fat, 7 g saturated fat, 166 mg cholesterol, 28 g carbohydrates, 6 g protein, 133 mg sodium, 0 g fiber.

WAYS TO SERVE IT UP
Present your pudding simply with whipped cream or fresh fruit. Or transform it with these ideas from Shaina Olmanson author of "Desserts in Jars."

1. Make vanilla pudding pops, right. Lightly grease commercially available ice pop molds, Olmanson uses the wrapper from a stick of butter for the task, then pour in the pudding. Freeze. "It's creamy and sweet and everything you want in (an ice pop) but it doesn't freeze so hard," she says.

2. Place pound-cake slices in a cake pan. Pour vanilla pudding hot off the stove over the pound cake. Let it cool and set. Top with fresh fruit.

3. Use pudding in layered desserts, such as a trifle or parfait. Creamy layers act as the glue that holds it all together, she writes.

TAHITIAN VANILLA PUDDING
Alice Medrich, a baker and teacher living in Berkeley, Calif., uses this egg-free vanilla pudding as a tart filling topped with a dried cherry compote in her book "Sinfully Easy Delicious Desserts" (Artisan, \$25.95). You may use a sauce made with fresh cherries instead, or garnish with fresh fruit and, perhaps, a drizzle of chocolate sauce.

Medrich uses Tahitian vanilla in

the pudding for its exotic flavor and nuances of cherry, she writes. You may substitute Mexican or Bourbon vanilla for the Tahitian, or use a vanilla bean: Heat the milk and cream with a whole vanilla bean until steaming hot, cover and let steep 15 minutes. Remove the bean, set aside and proceed with the recipe. You can also serve this pudding without the tart shell, plain or dressed up in a parfait.

Prep: 25 minutes
Cook: 26 minutes
Chill: 3 hours
Makes: 8 servings

Crust:
8 tablespoons (4 ounces) unsalted butter, melted
1/4 cup sugar
3/4 teaspoon pure Tahitian vanilla
1/8 teaspoon ground nutmeg
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 cup, plus 2 tablespoons flour

For the filling:
1/4 cup sugar
2 tablespoons plus 2 teaspoons cornstarch
1/8 teaspoon salt
2 cups half-and-half
2 teaspoons Tahitian vanilla
1. Heat the oven to 350 degrees.

For the crust, combine the butter, sugar, vanilla, nutmeg and salt in a medium bowl. Add flour; mix just until well-blended. If the dough seems too soft and gooey, let it stand for a few minutes to firm up.

2. Press the dough in a thin, even layer over the bottom and up the sides of a 9 1/2-inch fluted tart pan with a removable bottom. Press the dough squarely into the corners of the pan to avoid extra-thick edges. (Crust may be prepared 2 or 3 days ahead, wrapped and refrigerated. Bring to room temperature before baking.)

3. Place the pan on a baking sheet. Bake until the crust is fully

golden brown, 20-25 minutes. If the crust puffs up during baking, gently press it down with the back of a fork and prick it a few times. Cool crust on a rack.

4. Meanwhile, make the filling. Whisk the sugar, cornstarch and salt together in a heavy medium saucepan. Add about 3 tablespoons of the half-and-half; whisk to form a smooth paste. Whisk in the remaining half-and-half. Using a silicone spatula or a wooden spoon, stir the mixture constantly over medium heat, scraping the bottom, sides and corners of the pan, until the pudding thickens and begins to bubble at the edges,

about 5 minutes. Continue to cook and stir, 1 more minute. Remove from the heat; stir in vanilla.

5. Scrape the hot pudding into the crust. Level with a spatula. Let cool, 1 hour; refrigerate tart at least 2 hours to allow the pudding to set. Cover the tart once the filling is set.

Nutrition information per serving: 307 calories, 19 g fat, 12 g saturated fat, 53 mg cholesterol, 31 g carbohydrates, 4 g protein, 136 mg sodium, 0 g fiber

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