

In A Blais Of Science: How To Cook Like A TV Star

BY WENDELL BROCK
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ATLANTA — Richard Blais wants you to know that great flavors can be coaxed out of ordinary ingredients — and that a bit of simple science can add texture and fizz to food.

Demonstrating a few of the tricks that have made him famous, the “Top Chef” star, Atlanta restaurateur and author of the new cookbook, “Try This at Home: Recipes from My Head to Your Plate” (Clarkson Potter, \$30), is frying a burger in a pan at his midtown Atlanta restaurant, The Spence.

It’s not an ordinary ground-beef patty but a “beautifully marbled” amalgamation of fatty brisket and boneless top round speckled with the chunks of fat.

Many cooks squeeze every bit of juice out of the burger as it sizzles. That’s poor technique, Blais says, because it removes the flavor. Instead, the chef tosses a knob of butter into the pan — along with some garlic and sprigs of fresh thyme — to create a rich, glistening liquid that he spoons over the burger, again and again, until it is saturated. This is what he calls “treating a \$6 burger like a \$65 steak,” a simple step that adds luxury.

But there’s more. Blais takes a simple cheese sauce, pours it into a whipped-cream canister, chills it and squirts his so-called Cheese Wizard on top. Of course, you can use sliced cheese. But that’s no fun — especially if you are TV star with a love of showmanship and flashy cookery.

“Some people might look at this recipe and think it’s really adventurous,” Blais says.

But whipped cream is a coffee-drink staple. “They don’t realize that technology is already a part of their everyday life, and these tools are available now in so many markets relatively cheap.”

It has taken five weeks for the “Top Chef All-Stars” winner and father of two small children to find time to run through a few recipes from his new 125-recipe volume, which includes instructions for his signature Oysters with Horseradish Pearls, Macaroni and Headcheese and Aerated Cheesecake.

On this recent Tuesday afternoon, a CNN crew is setting up for an interview with Blais’s fellow Bravo star Andy Cohen, who is in town for a book signing at the Georgia Tech Barnes & Noble across the street. But when a writer, photographer, videographer and editor arrive from the AJC, Blais seems surprised, saying he’s not prepared for a video demonstration.

But the chef — a bona fide TV star who knows how to perform in front of a camera — quickly rises to the occasion and effortlessly runs through recipes for his Potato Chip Omelet, his Pecan Treacle Tart with Buttermilk-Ginger Frozen Yogurt and the burger. All the while, the man behind the FLIP Burger Boutique chain and the HD1 hot-dog restaurant explains the thought processes behind his book, which seeks to provide recipes for cooks at every level.

“I used to make fun of chefs who did a lot of recipes, and it was 5 ingredients, 20 minutes,” says the Long Island, N.Y., native who first cooked at McDonald’s. “But now I kind of realize the beauty of that, as I’m cooking for my family and cooking on the road. I am getting lots of email and questions about how you do things simple and quick. So the 10-minute recipe of four or five steps is important.”

The Pecan Treacle Tart, he explains, is “a mash-up ... of two really popular desserts.”

“We have treacle tart, which is very British, which is basically just a simple syrup mixed with bread crumbs, and a pecan pie. So what we’ve done is taken two very traditional dishes and sort of fused them together.”

Though the recipe calls for baking the tart in a fluted pan with a removable bottom, Blais makes it in individual baking dishes (there’s enough pastry and filling for four). I had excellent results when I cooked the tart at home in a glass pie plate. (And yes, it looked like a Southern pecan pie.) The treacly-ness comes from Lyle’s Golden Syrup. Blais is not crazy about super-sweet desserts, so he balances the syrup-laced tart with “the sourness and the funk of the buttermilk” yogurt.

Again, it’s about technique. The yogurt recipe calls for infusing the buttermilk with fresh ginger — a simple process that adds a sublime flavor. I froze mine at home in a Cuisinart ice-cream maker, and it worked effortlessly. But Blais, who has by now warmed to the camera and is not about to miss a good photo op, asks his assistants to bring in the liquid nitrogen.

“A lot of people think I am super creative and ultra avant-garde,” Blais jokes. “I am just

stealing junior high experiments. You can do this in a mixer. It’s little bit easier. ... But I am showing off.”

PECAN TREACLE TART

You can find Lyle’s Golden Syrup, a British import, at Whole Foods. No need to be fussy about the pan; you can use a regular pie pan or make this into four individual desserts.

Hands-on: 30 minutes Total time: 3 hours (includes chill time for pastry, baking and cooling of crust) Serves: 6 to 8

FOR THE CRUST

1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
1 teaspoon granulated sugar
1/2 teaspoon salt
8 tablespoons (1 stick) cold unsalted butter, diced
2 to 3 tablespoons ice water

FOR THE FILLING

1/2 cup packed fresh bread crumbs
2 tablespoons packed light-brown sugar
1/2 cup chopped pecans
4 pitted dates, finely minced
1 cup Lyle’s Golden Syrup

3 large eggs
1/2 teaspoon ground ginger
1/4 teaspoon table salt
Buttermilk-Ginger Frozen Yogurt for serving (see recipe, above)

TO MAKE THE CRUST

Put flour, sugar and salt in a food processor and pulse until combined. Add the butter and pulse until small pea-sized crumbs form. While pulsing, add the ice water 1 tablespoon at a time until the dough begins to hold together. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and knead gently until it holds together. Press into a flat disk, wrap tightly in plastic wrap, and

refrigerate for at least 1 hour, or up to 3 days.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Dust a work surface lightly with flour and, using a floured rolling pin, roll the dough into a 12-inch circle. Transfer it to a 10-inch fluted tart pan with a removable bottom and press the dough into the bottom and up the sides of the pan. Trim the excess dough. Transfer the pan to a baking sheet and bake for 10 minutes, or until set. Remove from the oven and let cool. (Leave the oven on).

TO MAKE THE FILLING

In a small bowl, stir the bread

crumbs, brown sugar, pecans and dates together until combined. In a medium bowl, whisk the golden syrup, eggs, ginger and salt together until well combined. Add the bread crumb mixture and fold together until combined. Pour into the cooled tart shell. Bake until the crust is golden, the filling is set, and a toothpick inserted in the center of the pie comes out clean, 40 to 45 minutes. Cool completely on a rack before slicing.

Remove the pan sides, cut the tart into slices, and serve with the frozen yogurt on the side.

Adapted from “Try this at Home” by Richard Blais (Clarkson Potter, \$30)

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