

Work Smarter NOT HARDER

PART 4: DESSERT!



By Becky McKinley
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of a dessert fan. My mother and all her friends had what I considered the continually rotting—although I now understand fermenting is probably the more appropriate word—brandied fruit sitting in a crock on the kitchen cabinet.

On a regular basis, Mom would dump a can of fruit cocktail into the crock. I will confess that I often stole the soggy grapes before the brandy was added. Fresh grapes were not exactly easy to come by in Clarendon, so to me, those grapes were a delicacy.

Once a week, a designated portion of the brandied fruit came out to make the clove-and-cinnamon-flavored fruitcake appear. My dad loved it. I loved the whipped cream that came on top.

Eventually, Mom graduated to rum cake. It was made with a boxed cake mix, Jell-O, lots of rum and who knows what else. I have since learned that many of these old-fashioned family recipes have a rather generous liquor component.

Oh well. Apparently, Mom believed dessert should come with a little spirit.

As I said, I was never much of a dessert person. I am much more comfortable with a savory dish than a three-layer cake, and for years, dessert was not the part of the meal that excited me most.

But lately, something has changed.

I find myself becoming a better—and certainly more enthusiastic—dessert maker.

Perhaps it is because I have finally discovered that

Every hostess has that family-favorite dessert—the one everyone requests, the one that has somehow become part of the family story.

I think back to my childhood and realize why I was never much



dessert does not have to be difficult to be delicious.

When I owned my catering company, I had a very simple strategy. I always fell back on my four or five favorite desserts. I knew they worked, I knew my clients loved them, and I could make them almost without thinking.

My secret was presentation.

A familiar dessert served in an unexpected way could suddenly feel completely new.

And that, I think, is one of the best lessons in working smarter, not harder.

There are two kinds of cooks: those who believe dessert should require three days, four mixing bowls and at least one trip to the grocery store for the ingredient they forgot—and those of us who know a little kitchen cleverness can produce the same “I spent all day making this” reaction with considerably less effort.

The secret isn’t taking shortcuts that compromise flavor. It is knowing where to spend your time and where to let a good ingredient—or a smart technique—do the work for you.

A beautiful dessert can begin with a purchased cheesecake, a good-quality ice cream, frozen puff pastry or even a bakery pie. Add one or two homemade touches and suddenly you have transformed something ordinary into something company-worthy.

Purchased cheesecake becomes something special with a spoonful of lemon curd and a handful of fresh berries. Add warm caramel and candied pecans and suddenly it has an entirely different personality.

Chocolate mousse looks positively elegant when spooned into tiny espresso cups or pretty stemmed glasses.

A favorite pound cake becomes individual shortcakes with berries and whipped cream.

And frozen puff pastry? It is practically a hostess's secret weapon. Add sliced fruit, a little sugar and a simple glaze, and you have a beautiful fruit tart with very little effort.

The trick is presentation.

During my catering years, I took plenty of shortcuts when entertaining. I had no shame about it. In fact, I considered it good business. I would order petite pie crusts or cannoli shells from Amazon and keep them on hand. In a real pinch, I would even buy a coconut cream pie, chocolate pie or lemon pie. Then I would spoon the filling into tiny shells and top them with whipped cream. A sprinkle of toasted coconut. Chocolate shavings. A little lemon twist.

Voila! I looked like a genius.

It was so easy—and so delicious.

A simple box of vanilla pudding could become an elegant little dessert when layered with miniature vanilla wafers, a slice of banana all in tiny shot glasses. Plastic, of course. Add whipped cream and a few crushed cookies on top, and suddenly everyone thinks you have been working in the kitchen all afternoon.

One of my favorite tricks was pumpkin cake. I would bake it in a sheet pan, freeze it and then cut out individual rounds with a biscuit or cookie cutter. A little cream cheese frosting on top and, if I was feeling particularly festive, a candy corn.

Adorable. And nobody needed to know how easy it was.

I could share many more ideas, but another time. Let's move on to my favorite part.

DESSERT COCKTAILS

Perhaps the ultimate example of working smarter, not harder is a dessert you can pour into a pretty glass.

A Brandy Alexander made with a scoop of good vanilla ice cream becomes dessert all by itself. An Espresso Martini is practically begging to end a dinner party. And a Salted Caramel White Russian feels more like dessert than a cocktail.

Then... there is crème de menthe. From the fifth grade until today, I have loved crème de menthe. I honestly cannot remember how my mother used it, and I am quite sure I was not supposed to be drinking it. But apparently, I did. And judging from how well I slept, it must have worked beautifully.

Today, I am still a believer in finding the easier, more clever way to make something special. Maybe that is what I have finally learned about dessert: it doesn't have to be complicated to be memorable.

Take something familiar. Make it beautiful. Add one delicious little homemade touch. And don't make it harder than it needs to be.

Because when guests are lingering around the table, laughing over one more glass of wine, they aren't thinking about how many hours you spent in the kitchen.

They're simply thinking: *This is delicious.* And isn't that the whole point?

So, this month, we're working smarter—not harder—and ending dinner on a very sweet note.

After all, life is short. We might as well have dessert!

MARS BAR MARTINI

¼ C. caramel, warmed

2 T. cinnamon sugar - mixed. I use 2 T. of sugar and about ¼ tsp. cinnamon

1 C. heavy cream

2 ounces Smirnoff Kissed Caramel

Pinch of cinnamon

Ice

Place caramel on a plate while warm. Place the cinnamon, sugar mixture on another plate. Dip the rim of a martini glass in caramel then in cinnamon sugar mixture.

In a cocktail shaker add the heavy cream, Smirnoff Kissed Caramel and cinnamon. Add the ice and shake until it is cold. Pour into glasses and top each one with whipped cream that has been sweetened and a cinnamon stick. *YUM!*

BRANDY ALEXANDER

Makes two generous cocktails

3 oz. brandy

2 oz. dark crème de cacao

3-½ C. vanilla ice cream

½ C. half-and-half or heavy cream

Add the brandy, crème de cacao, vanilla ice cream, half and-half and ice to a blender. Blend until thick, smooth and milkshake-like.

Pour into chilled coupe or martini glasses. Finish with freshly grated nutmeg and, if you like, a few chocolate curls.

Blend just until smooth. It becomes almost like a boozy chocolate-brandy milkshake.

Chef's touch: A tiny pinch of cinnamon or espresso powder makes the chocolate flavor pop without making it taste like coffee.



| Continued on next page



MAKE-AHEAD CHOCOLATE SOUFFLÉS

Serves 6-8 depending on the size of ramekin used.
Recipe adapted from America's Test Kitchen Cookbook.

To prepare ramekins

2 T. room temperature butter
2 T. granulated sugar

For Soufflés

8 oz semi-sweet chocolate
4 T. butter
1 T. Grand Marnier
½ tsp. vanilla extract
1/8 tsp. salt
6 large egg yolks
8 large egg whites
½ C. granulated sugar
¼ tsp. cream of tartar
2 T. confectioners' sugar

Prepare the ramekins – rub the butter on the inside of individual ramekins (recipe makes enough for six 9-oz ramekins or eight 7-oz ramekins), then coat with granulated sugar.

Make chocolate mixture – in a metal bowl set over a pan of simmering water, melt chocolate and butter until smooth. Remove the bowl from the heat and add the vanilla, Grand Mariner, and salt. Stir to combine and then set bowl aside.

Combine egg yolks and granulated sugar – depending on the kind of mixer you're using, the time for this step can vary. If you're using a standing mixer, mix on medium speed for about 3 minutes. If using a handheld mixer, it will take 8 minutes or more. You want to mix until the volume triples and the mixture is smooth and light yellow.

Fold into the chocolate mixture.

Thoroughly wash and dry the bowl and the beaters. Beat egg whites – in the clean bowl and with the clean beaters, beat the egg whites on medium-low speed for 1 – 2 minutes until frothy. Add the cream of tartar, increase the speed to medium high and mix for another 1 – 2 minutes.

Add the confectioners' sugar and mix another 1 – 2 minutes until stiff peaks form. Add one quarter of the egg whites to the chocolate mixture and stir vigorously. Once you have done so, gently fold the remaining egg whites into the mixture just until combined.

Spoon the mixture into the ramekins. Clean any drips with a paper towel. Tightly cover with plastic, then cover with foil. Place into the freezer immediately. These can stay in the freezer for as little as 3 hours or as much as a month.

When you're ready to serve, preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Position a rack one or two levels below the middle. Remove the ramekins from the freezer and remove the foil and plastic. Cut a piece of foil for each ramekin just longer than the circumference and wide enough to make a collar that sticks up roughly 2" above the top. Using tape, form a collar around each ramekin.

Place on a baking sheet and put in the oven. Bake for about 25 minutes (22 or

so if using 7-oz ramekins) until the top has risen but the middle is still creamy.

Serve with Creme Anglaise or any other condiment. I promise these look extremely hard but they are not. It is a very impressive dessert and done ahead of time.

BECKY'S EASY CHOCOLATE MOUSSE

This recipe is great. It can be frozen in a ziplock bag and piped into a small dessert dish. Top it with Whipped cream and shave a bit of chocolate on top. It is delicious!

Mini Marshmallows X 1-½ C.
4 T. Butter
¾ C. strong hot coffee
9 ounces semi sweet chips

Melt chocolate, butter, marshmallows, and coffee just until melted. You may still have some white ribbon from the marshmallows. Do not overheat. Must still be shiny.

4 C. heavy cream
3 T. instant vanilla pudding
1-½ C. powdered sugar
1-½ tsp. vanilla (Mexican or at least real)

In another bowl add cream, vanilla pudding, powdered sugar and vanilla. Beat until stiff. Slowly fold the cooled chocolate into cream mixture. Refrigerate. Recipe makes 28 servings of 1/3 C. each.



GALE GAND'S MINIATURE GERMAN CHOCOLATE CAKE

Over the years of catering I used this cake recipe 100 different times. It is slightly altered and is one of my favorite desserts.

For the cake
3 C. sugar
2-¾ C. all-purpose flour
1-1/8 C. cocoa powder, preferably Dutch-process
2-¼ tsp. baking powder
2-¼ tsp. baking soda
1-½ tsp. salt
3 eggs
1-½ C. milk
¾ C. vegetable oil
1 T. pure vanilla extract
1-½ C. very hot water

For the caramel
1-¼ C. sugar
1/3 C. water
2/3 C. heavy cream
½ C. macadamia nuts, toasted and roughly chopped
½ C. flaked sweetened coconut, toasted - watch this coconut as you toast it in the oven. It is quick to burn. Toast at 350 degrees on a sheet pan and stir often.

You'll need: A large sheet pan with sides, about 13 x 17 inches. Parchment or waxed paper. A 2-inch (approximately) round biscuit or cookie cutter.

Heat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease your sheet pan (above) and line the bottom and sides with parchment or waxed paper.

Sift together the 3 C. of sugar, flour, cocoa, baking powder, baking soda, and salt. Transfer to a mixer fitted with a whisk attachment (or use a hand mixer) and blend briefly.

Whisk together the eggs, milk, oil, and vanilla extract in a medium bowl. Add to the dry ingredients and mix at low speed for 5 minutes. Gradually add the

hot water, mixing at low speed just until combined. The batter will be quite thin.

Pour the batter into the pan. Bake until a tester inserted in the center of the cake comes out clean (a few crumbs are okay) and the center feels firm to the touch, 25 to 30 minutes. Let cool in the pan. Chill, covered, until ready to cut the cake.

Meanwhile, make the caramel: Pour the 1-¼ C. sugar into the center of a deep saucepan. Carefully pour the water around the walls of the pan, trying not to splash any sugar onto the walls. Do not stir; gently draw your finger twice through the center of the sugar, making a cross, to moisten it. Over high heat, bring to a full boil and cook without stirring, swirling the pan occasionally to even out the color, until medium caramel in color, 5 to 10 minutes. Immediately turn off the heat and use a wooden spoon to slowly and carefully stir in the cream (it will bubble up and may splatter). Stir in the macadamia and coconut. Set aside.

When ready to serve, cut rounds of the chilled cake with a biscuit or cookie cutter, 2 to 3 inches in diameter.

Tip: If the cake seems to be sticking, dip your cutter in cocoa powder between cuts.

If the sauce has cooled, rewarm it over low heat (or in a microwave) until softened. Place a cake on each plate, and drizzle with caramel sauce. Place another round of cake on top and drizzle lightly with more caramel sauce.

Tip: A great tip is to use a bought caramel sauce and warm it slightly. This step cuts your time in half at least. *AW*

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