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ALFAJORES

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For the cookies:

- 1-1/2 cups unsalted butter
- 1 cup confectioners' sugar
- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon almond extract
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/3 cup ground almonds (can be ground in a food processor)
- 3 cups unbleached all-purpose flour

For the filling:

- 2 cups firmly packed brown sugar
- 1 cup half & half or light cream or evaporated milk
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract

To make the cookies:

Cream the butter with the powdered sugar until fluffy. Stir in salt, extracts, ground almonds and flour. Wrap and chill 30 minutes. (If you chill longer, you have to let the dough warm up a bit before it can be rolled. Or, do what professional pastry chefs do: whack it with a rolling pin until it becomes more malleable).

Meanwhile, make the filling:

In a medium saucepan, heat brown sugar with cream over medium heat. As it cooks, brush inner sides of pan with a pastry brush dipped in cold water. This wipes away grainy sugar crystals. Heat until mixture reaches soft ball stage (238-240 F). Remove from heat - let cool to about 110 F. Stir in the butter and beat until mixture is thickened. Add vanilla. (Heat to loosen or add additional cream). If mixture is too thin, add in confectioners' sugar.

To bake the cookies:

Roll out dough 1/4 inch thick. Cut in 2-1/2-inch circles. Bake on a parchment-lined baking sheet at 350 F for 12-14 minutes. Cool baking sheets between batches. Cool cookies on wire racks.

To assemble Alfajores:

Spread some caramel filling on a cookie. Top with another cookie and press together nicely. Be careful, these are fragile. Dust tops with confectioner's sugar. Makes about 24.