

CHOCOLATE ESPRESSO BRÛLÉE

Some of my update receivers may be philosophically opposed to chocolate, but did you know it is fermented? Hence, I think it has some place, even if small, in a balanced diet. However, it is easy to go overboard, so save your chocolate and sugar calories for homemade dishes of superior quality like this one.

In the summer of 2000, I interviewed chocolate expert Maricel Presilla at her restaurant in New Jersey for an article on chocolate. She was kind enough to share one of the restaurant's favorite desserts, which was inspired by the Cuban cortadito--a dark espresso toned down with a little frothy milk. Like the cortadito, these are a perfect end to a meal when served in 4-ounce commercial demitasse cups and topped with crushed cacao nibs. Makes nine 4-ounce coffee brûlées. (Used by permission of Maricel Presilla.)

- 1 whole egg
- 4 egg yolks
- 2 oz. sugar
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 cup whole milk
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 3 star anise pods
- 1 vanilla bean, split open
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1/2 cup dark espresso
- 8 oz. milk chocolate (preferably El Rey's Caoba or Valrhona's Jivara)
- or a bittersweet chocolate (El Rey's Bucare, Scharffen Berger 60 percent, or Guittard Onyx), chopped fine
- 1 cup white sugar
cacao nibs (preferably Scharffen Berger)

To make the chocolate espresso cream:

Preheat oven to 335°F. Whisk the whole egg, egg yolks, and half the sugar together; set the mixture aside. In a saucepan, bring to a simmer the heavy cream, milk, and the rest of the sugar, cinnamon, star anise, vanilla beans, vanilla extract, and espresso. Remove the cinnamon sticks, star anise, and vanilla bean.

Turn off the heat and add the chopped chocolate. As it melts, whisk to combine. Do not overwhip!

Gradually stir the warm chocolate mixture into the whisked eggs and combine thoroughly.

To bake the coffee brulées:

Strain the mixture into a beaked container and pour into nine 4-ounce demitasse cups or ramekins. Place the cups or ramekins in a large baking pan. Place the pan in the middle rack of the preheated oven, and fill the pan with very hot water halfway up the sides of the ramekins. Bake at 335°F for 35 minutes or until set.

To caramelize the topping:

Cool the ramekins to room temperature. Sprinkle each one with a little white sugar. Caramelize the sugar with a chef's torch or under a broiler. Sprinkle about one-half teaspoon cacao nibs over the caramelized topping while still hot.