



Trifles: So pretty, so easy

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Susan Notter of the Pennsylvania School of Culinary Arts a...

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 By LYNN SCHMIDT
 Staff Writer

The trifle is a charlatan. It appears complex and fancy — so fancy, in fact, it may seem too good to eat — but really is quite simple to make. And never, ever too good to eat.

"It's something that people see is beautiful," said cookbook author and local food judge Connie Shuff. "People think it's a lot of work, and it really isn't."

You only need cake, something moist — such as jelly, liqueur or fruit — pudding and/or whipped cream, according to Shuff, who judges desserts at the annual Kitchen Kettle Rhubarb Festival in Intercourse and features three trifle recipes in her cookbook, "Connie's Creations & Collectibles."

It's all in the presentation. Tidy layers in a clear bowl display the strata of sweetness and can fool the eye into thinking culinary genius is needed. Not so. Even a culinary pro will admit it:

"We take sponge cake soaked in sherry, place it in the base of a container, add a jelly mixture, allow it to set, a lightened pastry cream, fresh fruit, whipped cream," revealed Susan Notter, director of the pastry arts program at Pennsylvania School of Culinary Arts. Notter has even created trifles using canned fruit.

Any see-through vessel will do, although the trifle bowl collecting dust in your hutch may come to mind. Use a dish with a rim wide enough that you can scoop a spoon down into it, Notter suggested, and let layers set before you add to them. Shuff likes to refrigerate her trifles for 24 hours before serving them.

A few revisions and it's possible to make a lower-fat version (see Epicurious recipe, D2.)

Notter said trifles aren't only for summer gatherings.

"Change the flavors," she suggested. "The cream could have nutmeg and cinnamon it it. Use pumpkin spice ... fold in pumpkin puree and whipped cream.

"Maybe saute apples in butter and cinnamon, poached pear, peach with a little lemon, cloves," she added. Think outside the bowl, but keep it all inside it, neatly.

And invite the crowd because trifles are not for serving an average family of four and they lose some luster as leftovers.

"You can't save it," Shuff said. "You have to have a gang."

PASTRY CREAM

2 cups whole milk

1/2 cup sugar

5 whole eggs

3 tablespoons cornstarch

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1 teaspoon vanilla

Bring the milk and half the sugar to a simmer.

Mix the eggs, cornstarch and remaining sugar in a bowl.

Pour half the warm milk over the egg mixture and stir until smooth

Add the egg mixture back to the warm milk in the pan.

Return to the heat. Using a whisk, stir until the pastry cream comes to a boil and thickens. Continue whisking for about 2 minutes.

Taste the pastry cream; it should be smooth and creamy but not starchy. If it does taste starchy, return to the heat and allow to cook a little longer.

Pour into a clean bowl and cover with plastic wrap.

Chill until ready for use.

Recipe from Chef Susan E. Notter, director of pastry arts, The Pennsylvania School of Culinary Arts.

APRICOT-CHERRY TRIFLE

Tanya Steel, editor-in-chief of Epicurious.com, recommends this recipe.

6 ripe apricots, halved and pitted

1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice

2 tablespoons apricot nectar

1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract

1 angel food cake, cut into 1/2-inch slices

2 1/2 cups nonfat plain yogurt

1 cup Bing cherries, halved and pitted

Cook first four ingredients in a medium saucepan over low heat for about 10 minute, or until apricots start to release juices. Remove from heat; set aside. Lay cake slices on waxed paper. Using a standard "rocks" glass (short tumbler), cut out 12 circles of cake. When apricots are cool, puree in blender 2 minutes or until smooth. Cover and refrigerate 30 minutes. Stir yogurt into apricot mixture. Place a few cherry halves on the bottom of a rocks glass. Spoon 2 tablespoons yogurt-apricot mixture over cherries; cover with a slice of cake; repeat twice. Top with cherries and a drizzle of yogurt-apricot mixture.

Recipe from Annie Clemmons, pastry chef at Cyrus in Healdsburg, California.

Lschmidt@Lnpnews.com

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