

Creamy Vanilla Bread Pudding

When I make this rich and comforting dessert at my restaurant, I keep a second pan in reserve for snacking, since my chefs are always stealing little spoonfuls. It's ridiculous how good the bread pudding is with two sauces and chantilly cream, but you don't have to go all out. As my chef-thieves will attest, the bread pudding is delicious straight from the pan. This pudding is more about the creamy custard than it is about the bread. I like the double whammy of using both the vanilla bean and the vanilla extract. If you don't have a vanilla bean, double the amount of extract and skip the vanilla-bean-steeping step.

3 cups heavy cream
1 vanilla bean (see headnote)
1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
5 slices white bread (I like Pepperidge Farm White Sandwich Bread), cubed
4 large eggs
3/4 cup sugar
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
Fresh Fig Sauce (optional; recipe below)
Creamy Caramel Sauce (recipe below)
Chantilly Cream (recipe below)

In a medium saucepan, heat the cream over low heat. Split the vanilla bean lengthwise with the tip of a paring knife and scrape the seeds out into the cream. Add the bean to the pot, too. Stir in the salt and heat the cream until warm to the touch. Take the pot off the heat and let the vanilla bean steep for 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Pile the bread cubes into a 9x13-inch baking dish, distributing them more or less evenly. In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment or using a hand mixer, whisk together the eggs and sugar on medium speed until the mixture is light yellow in color and falls from the beater in thick ribbons, about 5 minutes.

Add the vanilla extract. Remove the vanilla bean pod from the cream mixture and reheat the cream over medium heat. Do not let it boil, but do let it get quite hot. Remove the cream from the heat and slowly pour 1 cup of it into the egg mixture, whisking constantly.

Then pour the egg-cream mixture into the saucepan with the remaining cream and whisk it together. Strain the cream mixture through a fine-mesh strainer over the bread cubes in the baking dish. Give the pan a gentle shake to be sure all is distributed well and then let the bread absorb the custard for at least 30 minutes before baking.

If baking the bread pudding right away, heat the oven to 350°F, with a rack in the center. If not, cover it with plastic wrap and refrigerate it. When ready to bake, set the bread pudding dish in a larger roasting pan.

Add hot water to the roasting pan until the water is halfway up the sides of the baking dish. Bake in the center of the oven until the custard is just firm, 50 minutes to 1 hour (begin checking earlier; give the pan a gentle shake and take it out of the oven when the custard is no longer jiggly). Let cool a bit. Serve warm, at room temperature, or even cold. Put a serving in a large dish and top with fig sauce, caramel sauce, if using, and a dollop of chantilly cream.

MAKE AHEAD: - This tastes better the longer the bread soaks in the custard, so feel free to refrigerate it, unbaked, for as long as 24 hours. - You can also bake the bread pudding a day or two ahead; let it cool at room temperature before covering it with plastic wrap and refrigerating it. Take it out before serving and let it warm up a bit; you'll taste the vanilla better if the pudding is not very cold.

Creamy Caramel Sauce

Makes about 1 1/2 cups

1 cup sugar

1 cup heavy cream

Combine the sugar with 1/4 cup water in a medium saucepan. Dissolve the sugar over medium heat, stirring until the mixture is clear. Increase the heat to high and cook, swirling the pan to cook evenly but no longer stirring, until the caramel is a deep amber. (Check the color by carefully drizzling some onto a white plate.) Don't worry if the sugar hardens while cooking, simply stir it and continue cooking until it smooths out. Take the pot off the heat and carefully whisk in the cream. The caramel will sputter so be careful as it's very hot. Return the sauce to the heat and bring to a boil, whisking constantly, until smooth, 2 to 3 minutes. Let cool a bit before serving but serve warm.

Chantilly Cream

Makes about 1 1/2 cups

1 cup cream

1 tablespoon confectionersø sugar

1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract

Pinch kosher salt

In the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, combine the cream, sugar, extract, and salt. (Or combine the ingredients in a regular large bowl and use a hand mixer or a whisk and a lot of muscle.)

Whisk the ingredients together, gently at first, and then increasing the speed, until you can lift out the stopped whisk and leaves behind peaks just shy of firm. Be careful not to overbeat, however, or youøll get very sweet butter.

Fresh Fig Sauce

Makes about 3 1/2 cups

1 cup brandy

1 cup sugar

1 cinnamon stick

1 pint ripe fresh figs, preferably black mission, halved or quartered if large

In a medium saucepan, combine the brandy, 1 cup of water, and the cinnamon stick. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat and cook until reduced by half. Add the figs and cook, stirring occasionally, until the figs soften and absorb the flavor of the liquid, about another 10 minutes. Serve warm.

Recipes adapted from Stir: Mixing It Up in the Italian Tradition by Barbara Lynch and published by Houghton Mifflin