

The Best Easter Cassata

A labor of love. Start at least a day before you want to serve it, but it isn't a bad idea to do the parts over three or four days, if you have the time to plan it out. You'll be rewarded with a magnificent sponge cake filled with a citron-chocolate cannoli cream and topped with jewel-like glazed fruits. There's a reason the cassata is the famed Easter cake in Sicily.

Ingredients

filling

- 1½ pounds whole milk ricotta cheese
- 1 cup confectioners' sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/4 cup chopped candied citrus peel, cut in 1/4-inch
- 1/4 cup chopped semisweet chocolate, finely chopped

cake

- unsalted butter, for the pan
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup cornstarch
- 6 large eggs, yolks and whites separated
- 3/4 cup granulated sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon fine salt
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract

assembly

- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 1/4 cup dark rum
- Confectioners' sugar, for rolling
- 6 to 8 ounces marzipan

glaze and decorations

- 2 cups confectioners' sugar
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- Chopped pistachios or other nuts, and candied fruit (whole, strips, and pieces), for decorating

special equipment

- Mesh strainer and cheesecloth

stand mixer with paddle and whisk attachments

two 9-inch round pans, 2-inches deep

parchment paper

rolling pin

12-inch metal pie pan

pastry brush

Directions

for the filling

Line a mesh strainer with several layers of cheesecloth and set over a bowl. Put the ricotta in the strainer, cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight to drain.

Discard the drained liquid from the ricotta. Using a stand mixer with the paddle attachment on medium speed, beat ricotta, confectioners' sugar and vanilla, 1 to 2 minutes or until creamy. Use a rubber spatula to stir in the candied citrus and chopped chocolate. Transfer to a bowl, cover and refrigerate until ready to assemble cake. (May be made 1 day ahead.)

for the cake

Preheat oven to 375 degrees with racks in the upper and lower thirds of the oven. Lightly butter two 9-inch round cake pans, line bottoms with parchment and butter the parchment.

In a small bowl, whisk the flour and cornstarch.

In a stand mixer with the whisk attachment, mix egg yolks with half of the sugar. Add the salt and vanilla extract and beat on high until mixture is pale, light and forms ribbons when it falls from the whisk, about 5 minutes. Scrape down the sides of the bowl once or twice. Transfer the batter to a large mixing bowl and reserve.

Thoroughly wash and dry the stand-mixer bowl and whisk attachment. Using the stand mixer and whisk attachment, beat egg whites on low until they are white and foamy, about 1 minute. Slowly pour in the remaining sugar, gradually raising the mixer speed to high. Continue beating until mixture forms soft peaks, 2 to 3 minutes.

Using a rubber spatula, stir about 1/4 of the whites into the yolk mixture to lighten it. Then fold in half the remaining whites. Through a mesh strainer, sprinkle half of the flour mixture over and fold in carefully, trying not to deflate the batter. Repeat with remaining egg whites, then the remaining flour.

Divide the batter between the prepared cake pans and gently smooth the tops. Bake for 15 to 18 minutes, rotating pans halfway through, until a tester comes out clean and the cakes lightly spring back when gently pressed. Let cool 10 minutes in pans before transferring to a wire rack to cool completely. You can make the cakes a day ahead. Wrap them tightly in plastic wrap when they're completely cool.

for assembly

Dissolve the sugar in 2 tablespoons of boiling water in a small bowl. Stir in the rum and set aside to cool.

Line a 12-inch pie pan with plastic wrap, overlapping pieces if necessary to cover, and letting some hang over the edge. Dust a clean surface and a rolling pin with confectioners' sugar. Roll marzipan to 1/8-inch thickness and cut into strips 2 inches wide. Line the sides of the pie tin with the marzipan strips, fitting them around the inside edge. Press the ends of the strips together to smooth the seams. You should have a band of marzipan, 2-inches high, lining the the edge of the pan. (You may not use all of the marzipan.)

Cut across both cakes into 1/2-inch slices. Place cake slices flat on the bottom of the pan in a single layer, fitting them snugly and trimming where necessary to fit. Lightly brush cake with some of the rum syrup. Spread ricotta filling evenly over bottom cake layer, then cover filling with a second layer of cake slices. Trim and fit the top cake slices to fit, as in the first layer. (You may have extra cake pieces.) Brush with more rum syrup.

Wrap tightly in plastic wrap and refrigerate at least 3 hours and up to overnight. Longer is better.

for glazing and decorating

Remove cake from refrigerator and remove the plastic wrap. Put a serving plate on top of the cake and invert the cake so the pan is upside down on the plate. Remove the pan. Whisk confectioners' sugar with lemon juice and 1 tablespoon water until smooth and thick. Spread the glaze evenly over the cake slices, leaving the marzipan edges exposed. Let set for 5 minutes. Decorate with chopped pistachios and candied fruits. Refrigerate if not serving immediately..

total time: 5 hours (plus drain ricotta overnight)

active prep: 1 hour

serves: 10

difficulty: *moderate*