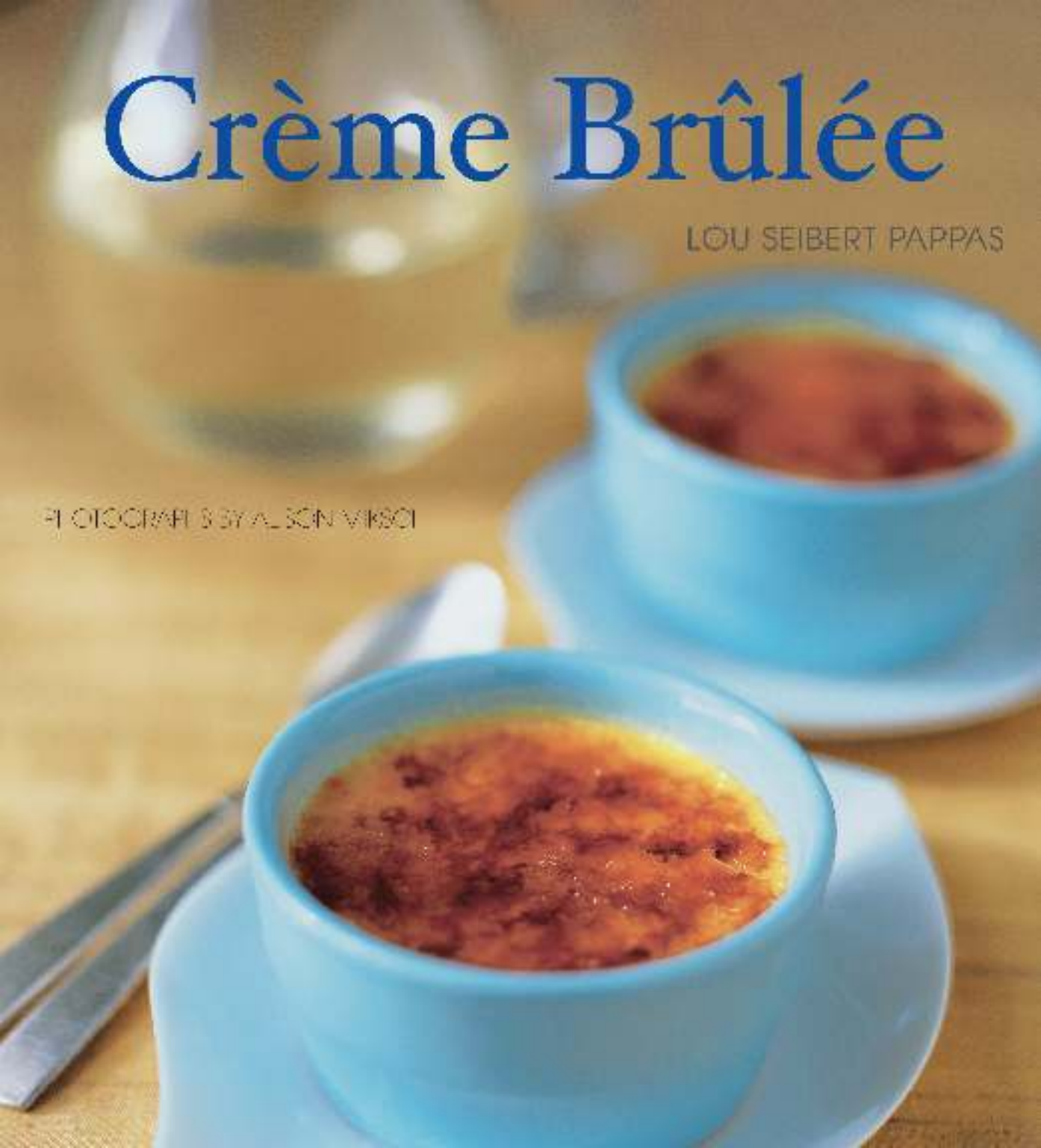


# Crème Brûlée

LOU SEIBERT PAPPAS

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALISON VIKSICI



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# Crème Brûlée

Lou Seibert Pappas

Photographs by Alison Miksch



**CHRONICLE BOOKS**  
SAN FRANCISCO

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*There is no love sincerer than the love of food.*

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

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# INTRODUCTION

WITH ITS SILKEN CUSTARD AND CARAMELIZED CRISP TOPPING, crème brûlée ranks as one of the most popular desserts in America. Around the globe, its innovative presence brings gustatory delight and pleasure galore as well.

The joys and rewards of making crème brûlée are multifold: It is quick and easy for a novice to prepare. It requires just four ingredients plus flavorings. It is elegant, luxurious, and versatile for countless dining occasions. And though its forte is mainly as a dessert, it has spawned tempting savory versions to enjoy around the clock. Savory custards can be served as first courses, side dishes, or light entrées. They may be topped with cheese, bread cubes, or, for a sweet touch, a light sprinkling of sugar.

Its roots can be traced to a recipe called Grilled Cream in a seventeenth-century English cookery book. It was first popularized in the dining halls at King's College in Cambridge. The close Spanish relative is *crema catalana*, a custard imbued with lemon and cinnamon. Though they have given the dish its name, it was only in recent years that the French acquired the custom of serving crème brûlée—or “burnt cream.” (Both Escoffier's *Guide Culinnaire* and *Larousse Gastronomique* bypass the subject.)

The preparation is a short two-part procedure. First, the rich custard mixture is prepared and baked. Sweet versions are then chilled, while savory ones are ready immediately. Then the top is caramelized. A butane gas blowtorch with a powerful approximately 2700°F flame neatly browns the surface without reheating the custard or its container. By contrast, a broiler readily sears a battery of dishes at once and also warms the contents.

For the cook, the roster of flavors is boundless. Aromatic spices and fresh or dried herbs—lavender, basil, ginger, lemongrass, chiles, and kaffir lime leaves—can scent these custards. Various liqueurs and liquors, Mexican chocolate, and a bevy of sugars lend intrigue.

As your family and guests tap through the caramel-sealed top to relish the rich, velvety interior of these custards, compliments will abound. This collection of tantalizing recipes offers taste-tingling surprise and delight.

Enjoy!

—Lou Seibert Pappas

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# INGREDIENTS

**Cream:** The classic cream for crème brûlée is heavy (whipping) cream, containing 36 percent butterfat and readily available in half-pint and 1-pint containers in grocery stores. It contains the proper amount of butterfat. When you add rich ingredients, such as cheeses in savory recipes or chocolate in dessert recipes, you may choose to lighten the fat content by replacing some of the heavy cream with half-and-half (10.5 percent butterfat) or light cream (18 percent). The substitution of all half-and-half or milk for the cream results in a dish similar to a regular baked egg custard rather than a rich crème brûlée.

**Sugar:** For sweetening the custard, fine granulated or light brown sugar is usually the preferred choice. For caramelizing the top, many options abound: superfine sugar, regular granulated sugar, confectioners' sugar, light or dark brown sugar, or raw sugar such as demerara or turbinado. Shaved piloncillo, a Mexican brown sugar, yields a delectable molasses-style topping.

**Eggs:** Grade-A large eggs are the traditional choice for recipes and were used in testing. It is important to keep eggs refrigerated and to check the date on the carton to ensure freshness. The proportions used in this book are 6 egg yolks to 2 cups of cream. When rich ingredients such as chocolate and cheese are added, the number of yolks is sometimes reduced.

**Flavorings:** Vanilla beans, with their tiny black flavor-packed seeds, lend more flavor than vanilla extract when vanilla is the primary flavoring, yet pure vanilla extract is a desirable complementary addition to other flavorings in many recipes. Liquors and liqueurs are superb enhancers. Choices include brandy, Cognac, Calvados, dark rum, tequila, and liqueurs such as Grand Marnier, Triple Sec, Kahlúa, amaretto, framboise, and Poire William.

**Herbs and Spices:** Lavender, lemongrass, ginger, kaffir lime leaves, basil, chives, tarragon, and dill lend a special touch to sweet and savory crèmes brûlées.



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**Fruit:** Practically any fruit can be used in a crème brûlée, with the exception of pineapple. Fresh pineapple contains an enzyme that prevents a custard from setting properly. Fruits at the peak of their season are the most flavorful.

**Chocolate:** White chocolate, milk chocolate, bittersweet, or semisweet chocolate are incorporated into some crèmes brûlées. Choose a fine-quality bittersweet chocolate containing a high proportion of cocoa butter and pure chocolate. Among the desirable brands are Callebaut, Scharffen Berger, Lindt, Guittard, and Valrhona.

**Savory Ingredients:** A variety of cheeses, vegetables, herbs, and seafood enhance savory custards. Some of the custards in this book are more like savory bread puddings.

## EQUIPMENT

**Baking Dishes:** Many styles of ovenproof baking dishes are available, but the standard size is a 5-inch-diameter flan dish (measured across the top). A 6-ounce porcelain ramekin (a miniature soufflé dish) can be substituted for the flan dishes called for in these recipes. And even a slightly smaller 5¼-ounce ramekin can accommodate, although you may want to slightly decrease the amount of sugar or cheese used for topping. (See *Caramelizing the Sugar and Browning the Cheese* on page 11.) Other styles such as square or heart-shaped dishes are sometimes used in fine restaurants. If you prefer a generous sugar crust, choose dishes with a larger surface. Any ovenproof dish can also be used, such as custard cups or small baking dishes.

**Bain-Marie:** A large baking pan or roasting pan should be used as a bain-marie, or water bath, during baking. Place the prepared dishes in the pan and fill it with warm water to come halfway up the sides of the dishes. This provides even, gentle moist heat.

**Whisk:** A balloon-type stainless-steel wire whisk is handy for beating eggs swiftly and easily.

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**Grater and Zester:** For zesting citrus, a grater or zester is invaluable for making fine shreds of zest.

**Double Boiler:** A double boiler is composed of two pans that fit together; water is heated in the lower pan. The water should be held at a simmering point and be at least 1 inch below the surface of the top pan. This pan is useful for melting chocolate and cooking delicate foods such as custards and egg dishes, to prevent them from overheating or curdling. To improvise this pan, place a stainless-steel bowl over a saucepan filled with 1 inch of barely simmering water.

**Sieve:** A sieve, or strainer, is useful for removing solid flavorings such as herbs and spices from hot cream or sauces. Purists may strain custard before baking to remove fine particles such as citrus zest or egg threads. A small sieve is best to use for evenly dusting confectioners' sugar; just stir it with a spoon while moving the sieve above the dessert.

**Butane Blowtorch:** A hand-powered butane blowtorch is the ideal tool for caramelizing a sugar topping (or browning a cheese topping) swiftly and efficiently. It quickly sears sugar within a minute without overheating the container. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for use.

**Broiler:** An alternative to the torch is an oven broiler. It heats the dishes during broiling, making them too hot to serve, so sweet custards will need a brief refrigeration of 5 minutes before serving. (It is desirable to serve savory custards piping hot.) Broiling does have the advantage of finishing many custards simultaneously, but care must be taken to avoid burning the sugar.

**Salamander:** This tool, available in some kitchen shops, consists of a metal disk with a long handle; the disk is heated over a gas flame and then placed directly on the sugar to caramelize it, much like a branding iron.

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# TECHNIQUES

IF YOU CHECK A DOZEN COOKBOOKS FOR CRÈME BRÛLÉE recipes, you are likely to find a dozen different methods for assembling and baking the custards. This is surprising, given the few ingredients involved.

Many recipes advise scalding or boiling the cream and baking the custard at a temperature as high as 350°F. Yet culinary science tells us that the best results are obtained when eggs are heated slowly and gently. *Cook's Illustrated* magazine tested thirty-six methods for making crème brûlée, and my testing collaborated their results. Luckily, the simplest method—using cold ingredients and low heat—proved the best.

The cream does not need heating and is best used directly from the refrigerator or cooled to room temperature if it was heated with flavorings. Some recipes say to cook the cream-egg mixture in a double boiler, but this stove-top method heats the mixture too quickly for it to thicken the liquid properly and yields a soft, runny custard. A baking temperature of 275°F yields a silkier product than does a higher temperature. You can check for doneness by looking to see if the center of each custard still jiggles slightly.

## PREPARING THE CUSTARD

Cold eggs are easier to separate, because the yolks are firmer. If you plan to use the egg whites in a soufflé or cake, use three dishes when separating eggs, as a speck of yolk in the whites prevents them from beating to maximum volume.

Whisk the cream into the beaten yolks without overbeating, as bubbles are not desirable.

If melting chocolate to add to the custard, melt it over barely simmering water to keep from overheating it, as it can scorch easily.

Pour the mixture into the dishes, allowing at least  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch head space for the sugar topping.

A baked custard is done when the center still jiggles slightly, as it will continue to firm up once it is removed from the oven.

## CHILLING

Sweet custards should be refrigerated for at least 2 hours, or up to 2 days, before caramelizing.

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## CARAMELIZING THE SUGAR

Different sugars produce slightly different results when caramelized. Brown sugar tends to melt the quickest, in less than a minute. Superfine and regular granulated sugar melt to form a thin, solid disk. Confectioners' sugar should be sifted or pressed through a sieve to make an even layer so it will brown evenly. Raw sugars are slower to melt than finer sugars, but produce a nice, even browning.

**Oven-Dried Brown Sugar:** Due to the moisture content of brown sugar, it is recommended to dry it before caramelizing. Spread light or dark brown sugar out on a baking sheet in a  $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch layer and bake in a preheated 275°F oven for 8 to 10 minutes, or until browned a shade darker. Let cool, place in a small resealable plastic bag, and crush it thoroughly with a rolling pin or flat metal mallet to make fine crystals. Brown sugar treated in this manner has an excellent flavor when caramelized.

The amount of sugar you use to caramelize the top can vary with personal taste and the diameter of the dish. If you use flan dishes, which have a wider diameter, 1 tablespoon of sugar is a good amount for each dish. With a 6-ounce or smaller ramekin, which has a 4-inch or less diameter, about 2 teaspoons of sugar will cover the surface nicely.

When caramelizing the sugar topping of dessert crèmes brûlées under a broiler, you may prefer to place the containers in a pan and fill the pan with cold water and ice to come halfway up the sides of the dishes. This keeps the containers from overheating, and you can serve the desserts immediately (rather than refrigerating them briefly to cool).

## BROWNING THE CHEESE

The blowtorch technique for browning cheese is essentially the same as that used to caramelize sugar (see below). For savory recipes that call for cheese toppings, use 4 teaspoons grated Parmesan cheese for each flan dish or about 3 teaspoons if substituting ramekin-size dishes.

## USING A BLOWTORCH OR A BROILER

Use caution and follow the manufacturer's instructions when using a blowtorch. Searing one dish at a time, hold the blowtorch about 4 inches from the top of the dish, moving the torch constantly so that the sugar (or cheese) browns evenly. Be especially careful if the custard contains alcohol, as it can cause the sugar to sputter. When using a broiler to caramelize, place the dishes about 4 inches from the heat source. Watch carefully and turn the baking

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sheet holding the dishes if necessary to brown the custards evenly. Wear oven mitts when broiling and handling the baking sheet in the oven.

Sugar disks can be made separately from the custard. Place a sheet of aluminum foil on a baking pan. Place a 5- or 4-inch-diameter bowl upside down on the foil and draw around it with a pencil; use the larger size for flan dishes and the smaller size for ramekins. Repeat as needed to make the disks. Spread vegetable oil or unsalted butter lightly over each circle. Sprinkle 1 tablespoon of raw or oven-dried brown sugar or granulated sugar evenly over the circle for flan-size custards, or 2 teaspoons for ramekin-size ones. Using a hand-held blowtorch, caramelize the sugar by holding the torch about 4 inches from the surface of the foil and moving the torch to brown the sugar evenly. Or, preheat the broiler and place under the broiler 4 inches from the heat source; watching carefully, broil until the sugar caramelizes, 1 to 2 minutes. Let cool, then remove by peeling off the foil. Store in an airtight container for up to 4 days.

Crème brûlée can be made up to 2 days in advance and refrigerated, but wait to add the sugar topping and caramelize it until shortly before serving. If you have used a broiler to caramelize, refrigerate the sweet crèmes brûlées for 5 minutes to cool the dishes slightly before serving. The topping will start to melt and liquefy after about 1 hour.

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# CLASSIC AND CREATIVE

THIS CAPTIVATING COLLECTION COVERS A SPECTRUM OF flavors imbued with spices and herbs, liqueurs, and prominent holiday foods such as eggnog, cranberries, and pumpkin. The delectable sweets lend a perfect finale to a luncheon or dinner menu. Plus, they are ideal desserts to prepare in advance.

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# Classic Vanilla Bean Crème Brûlée

The classic crème brûlée has spawned countless flavor variations, yet this refined version is elegant in its simplicity. A vanilla bean is a must for superb flavor; vanilla extract is not an equal substitute.

SERVES 6

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>2 cups heavy (whipping) cream</b>               | <b>2 tablespoons Cognac (optional)</b>  |
| <b>4-inch piece vanilla bean, split lengthwise</b> | <b>6 tablespoons oven-dried brown sugar (see page 11) or granulated sugar for topping</b> |
| <b>6 large egg yolks</b>                           |   |
| <b>⅓ cup granulated sugar</b>                      |   |

Pour the cream into a medium saucepan, scrape the seeds from the vanilla bean into the cream, and add the vanilla pod. Place over medium heat until small bubbles form around the edges of the pan. Remove from the heat and let cool to room temperature. Remove the vanilla pod and scrape any remaining seeds into the cream.

Preheat the oven to 275 °F.

In a medium bowl, whisk the egg yolks until pale in color. Whisk in the ⅓ cup granulated sugar until dissolved. Gradually whisk in the cream. Stir in the Cognac, if desired.

Place six standard-size flan dishes in a baking pan. Divide the custard mixture among the dishes. Pour warm water into the pan to come halfway up the sides of the dishes. Bake in the oven for 35 to 40 minutes, or until the center of each custard still jiggles slightly. Remove from the oven and lift the dishes from the hot water. Let cool briefly, then refrigerate for at least 2 hours or up to 2 days.

When ready to serve, place the dishes on a baking sheet. Evenly sprinkle 1 tablespoon brown or granulated sugar over each custard. Using a hand-held blowtorch, caramelize the sugar (see page 11).







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# Catalan Cinnamon Crème Brûlée

In Spain, this is called *crema catalana* (Catalonian cream) or *crema cremada*, “burnt cream.” The Catalans claim to have invented the custard, though its roots are traced to a seventeenth-century English recipe. Sometimes, Spanish restaurants serve it without the caramelized sugar topping. If your herb garden boasts lemon balm, garnish each dish with a sprig to exude a citrus aroma.

SERVES 6

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>1½ cups heavy (whipping) cream</b>   | <b>6 large egg yolks</b>                                |
| <b>½ cup half-and-half</b>              | <b>⅓ cup sugar, plus 6 tablespoons for topping</b>      |
| <b>1 cinnamon stick</b>                 | <b>Lemon wedges for garnish</b>                         |
| <b>¼ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg</b> | <b>Lemon balm or mint sprigs for garnish (optional)</b> |
| <b>2 tablespoons grated lemon zest</b>  |   |

Preheat the oven to 275°F. In a medium saucepan, combine the cream, half-and-half, cinnamon stick, nutmeg, and lemon zest. Place over medium heat until small bubbles form around the edges of the pan. Remove from the heat and let cool to room temperature. Remove the cinnamon stick.

In a medium bowl, whisk the egg yolks until pale in color, then whisk in the ⅓ cup sugar until dissolved. Whisk in the cream mixture.

Place six standard-size flan dishes in a baking pan. Divide the custard mixture among the dishes. Pour warm water into the pan to come halfway up the sides of the dishes. Bake in the oven for 35 to 40 minutes, or until the center of each custard still jiggles slightly. Remove from the oven and lift the dishes from the hot water. Let cool briefly, then refrigerate for at least 2 hours or up to 2 days.

When ready to serve, place the dishes on a baking sheet and evenly sprinkle 1 tablespoon sugar over each custard. Using a hand-held blowtorch, caramelize the sugar (see page 11). Garnish each dish with a lemon wedge and a sprig of lemon balm or mint, if desired.



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# Cappuccino Crème Brûlée

Here's a crème brûlée with a rich coffee flavor, accented by Kahlúa or brandy. It is nice to garnish the top with a few chocolate-covered coffee beans. Turbinado sugar is a raw sugar with coarse blond crystals and a delicate molasses flavor.

SERVES 6

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>5 teaspoons instant espresso or instant coffee granules</b> | <b>½ cup firmly packed light brown sugar</b>   |
| <b>2 tablespoons hot water</b>                                 | <b>3 tablespoons Kahlúa or brandy</b>  |
| <b>2 cups heavy (whipping) cream</b>                           | <b>6 tablespoons oven-dried brown sugar (see page 11) or turbinado sugar for topping</b> |
| <b>6 large egg yolks</b>                                       |  |

Preheat the oven to 275 °F. In a medium bowl, dissolve the espresso or coffee granules in the hot water and stir in the cream.

In another medium bowl, whisk the egg yolks until pale in color. Whisk in the light brown sugar until dissolved. Whisk in the espresso mixture and the Kahlúa or brandy.

Place six standard-size flan dishes in a baking pan. Divide the custard mixture among the dishes. Pour warm water into the pan to come halfway up the sides of the dishes. Bake in the oven for 35 to 40 minutes, or until the center of each custard still jiggles slightly. Remove from the oven and lift the dishes from the hot water. Let cool briefly, then refrigerate for at least 2 hours or up to 2 days.

When ready to serve, place the dishes on a baking sheet and evenly sprinkle 1 tablespoon oven-dried brown or turbinado sugar over each custard. Using a hand-held blowtorch, caramelize the sugar (see page 11).

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# Crème Brûlée à l'Orange

This ultrapopular rich custard dessert is elegant unadorned, yet it lends itself to sumptuous embellishments, such as a shower of fresh raspberries, blackberries, sliced strawberries, or blueberries. Or, add a frosty fillip with a dollop of vanilla bean ice cream or toasted almond ice cream.

SERVES 6

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>6 large egg yolks</b>                           | <b>2 teaspoons grated orange zest</b>                                |
| <b>½ cup sugar, plus 6 tablespoons for topping</b> | <b>3 tablespoons Grand Marnier, curaçao, or other orange liqueur</b> |
| <b>2 cups heavy (whipping) cream</b>               |  |

Preheat the oven to 275°F. In a medium bowl, whisk the egg yolks until pale in color and then whisk in the ½ cup sugar until dissolved. Whisk in the cream, orange zest, and orange liqueur.

Place six standard-size flan dishes in a baking pan. Divide the custard mixture among the dishes. Pour warm water into the pan to come halfway up the sides of the dishes. Bake in the oven for 35 to 40 minutes, or until the center of each custard still jiggles slightly. Remove from the oven and lift the dishes from the hot water. Let cool briefly, then refrigerate for at least 2 hours or up to 2 days.

When ready to serve, place the dishes on a baking sheet and evenly sprinkle 1 tablespoon sugar over each custard. Using a hand-held blowtorch, caramelize the sugar (see page 11).

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# Eggnog Crème Brûlée

Perfect for the holidays, this rich custard is an ideal finish to a gala family or guest dinner. Enlist any young guests to help with the last-minute touch of sprinkling the sugar over the custards before caramelizing; they enjoy having a part in the cooking procedure. Freshly grated nutmeg adds incomparable flavor.

SERVES 6

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>6 large egg yolks</b>                | <b>2 tablespoons brandy</b>   |
| <b>⅓ cup granulated sugar</b>           | <b>2 tablespoons rum</b>  |
| <b>2 cups heavy (whipping) cream</b>    | <b>6 tablespoons oven-dried brown sugar (see page 11) for topping</b> |
| <b>½ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg</b> |   |

Preheat the oven to 275°F. In a medium bowl, whisk the egg yolks until pale in color, then whisk in the granulated sugar until dissolved. Whisk in the cream, nutmeg, brandy, and rum.

Place six standard-size flan dishes in a baking pan. Divide the custard mixture among the dishes. Pour warm water into the pan to come halfway up the sides of the dishes. Bake in the oven for 35 to 40 minutes, or until the center of each custard still jiggles slightly. Remove from the oven and lift the dishes from the hot water. Let cool briefly, then refrigerate for at least 2 hours or up to 2 days.

When ready to serve, place the dishes on a baking sheet and evenly sprinkle 1 tablespoon brown sugar over each custard. Using a hand-held blowtorch, caramelize the sugar (see page 11).





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# Lavender-Lemon Crème Brûlée

Fresh or dried lavender flowers imbue a classic crème brûlée with their intriguing scent. Choose French lavender, as it has a pleasing, decisive flavor, while other varieties can have a medicinal overtone. Garnish with lavender blossoms to identify the dish.

SERVES 6

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>2 cups heavy (whipping) cream</b>  | <b>6 large egg yolks</b>                                       |
| <b>2 tablespoons fresh or 1½ teaspoons dried lavender blossoms, plus more for garnish</b> | <b>⅓ cup granulated sugar</b>                                  |
| <b>2 teaspoons grated lemon zest</b>  | <b>6 tablespoons confectioners' sugar, sifted, for topping</b> |

Preheat the oven to 275°F. In a medium saucepan, combine the cream, lavender blossoms, and the lemon zest. Place over medium heat until small bubbles form around the edges of the pan. Remove from the heat and let cool to room temperature. Strain through a sieve and discard the lavender.

In a medium bowl, whisk the egg yolks until pale in color. Whisk in the granulated sugar until dissolved. Whisk in the lavender-flavored cream.

Place six standard-size flan dishes in a baking pan. Divide the custard mixture among the dishes. Pour warm water into the pan to come halfway up the sides of the dishes. Bake in the oven for 35 to 40 minutes, or until the center of each custard still jiggles slightly. Remove from the oven and lift the dishes from the hot water. Let cool briefly, then refrigerate for at least 2 hours or up to 2 days.

When ready to serve, place the dishes on a baking sheet and, using a small sieve, evenly sprinkle 1 tablespoon confectioners' sugar over each custard. Using a hand-held blowtorch, caramelize the sugar (see page 11). Garnish each dish with a few lavender blossoms.



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