

Classic Crème Caramel

A light touch and gentle baking make a silky smooth custard

BY SUSAN McCREIGHT LINDEBORG

My mother made terrific custard. Baked in brown ceramic cups with white glazed interiors, the top sprinkled with nutmeg, it was heavenly. I ate her custard, hot or cold, straight out of the cup. But it wasn't until I was 16 years old while on a trip to Santa Fe, New Mexico, that I realized there was more to custard than mom's humble pudding.

It was there, at the historic La Fonda Hotel, that I first tasted *flan*. The menu described *flan* as baked custard, but this *flan* wasn't like anything mom had ever made. Instead of in a cup, it was served on a plate, where it sat quivering in a pool of dark caramel sauce. That first bite slid across my tongue, and I was thrilled by the contrast between the rich eggy custard and the slightly burnt taste of caramel. I had no idea how *flan* was made, but I promised myself then that I'd learn.

In the years since that night at La Fonda, I've made hundreds, probably even thousands of caramel custards, both at home and in restaurant kitchens. In that time I've learned that *flan* is simply the Spanish cousin of the French-born *crème caramel*, but made with sweetened condensed milk rather than whole milk or cream. At heart they are the same, an egg-rich custard baked in a caramel-lined cup, unmolded and served in its own sweet sauce.

In its most basic form, custard is a mixture of a milk product (whole milk, half-and-half, cream, condensed milk, or skim milk), sugar, eggs (with additional yolks sometimes added), and flavorings. Alter the type of milk and the quantity of eggs and egg yolks, and you can change the texture and flavor of the finished custard.

It should be no secret that fat is the key to a

Perfectly cooked crème caramel is silky smooth all the way through. Just firm enough to hold its shape, the custard should quiver when you tap the plate.





An even caramel coating is the goal, but work carefully—it's hot. The caramel will begin to set immediately, so work quickly and always hold the molds with a towel or a hot pad. Hot caramel can cause serious burns.

creamy custard. However, the richest custards, made primarily of cream and egg yolks, are too soft to unmold. Without the proteins particular to egg whites, a custard won't set properly. Baked cream-and-egg-yolk custards remain practically liquid and must be served in their baking molds. They're perfect for *crème brûlée*, with a crisp layer of caramel on top. Custards made with sweetened condensed milk (like my first *flan*) are part of the cuisines of Central America and Southeast Asia. Condensed-milk custards are sweet and have a rich texture similar to those made with heavy cream.

At the other end of the scale, custards made with skim milk and few egg yolks set up and unmold very easily. Their texture is as smooth as any custard made with whole milk and whole eggs, but they don't taste as rich.

In my opinion the best *crème caramel* is made with whole milk and whole eggs with a few extra yolks added for richness. The texture is silky smooth and deliciously rich.

MAKE THE CARAMEL WITH CAUTION

Use a heavy, 1- to 1½-quart saucepan with a flat bottom and a snug-fitting lid to cook the caramel. The characteristics of the pan and lid are important. A level bottom helps the sugar cook evenly, and a heavy pan is less likely to have hot spots, which could allow the sugar to burn. Be sure the lid is tight enough to capture the steam. You want the steam to

condense and wash away any sugar crystals that might cling to the sides of the pan.

Before you start caramelizing the sugar, arrange your molds so they're close at hand. Combine the water and sugar (see recipe below) in a separate mixing bowl, stirring until the sugar is almost dissolved, then pour the mixture directly into the center of the saucepan. This may seem like an unnecessary step, but it will help you avoid getting sugar crystals on the sides of the pan, where they may not dissolve. A single undissolved sugar crystal can start a chain reaction, promoting the formation of others until the entire caramel mixture becomes grainy.

Bring the sugar water to a boil and, as an extra precaution, dip a small (1- to 1½-inch) pastry brush in cold water and brush around the inside of the pan. Cover the pan and boil 1 minute to make sure no sugar crystals remain. Do not stir. Uncover and continue boiling until the sugar begins to color. Gently swirl the pan over the heat until the caramel is medium-dark brown. A light-colored caramel hasn't enough flavor, and a really dark caramel tastes burned. Once the sugar starts caramelizing, watch it closely so that you can stop it at the just the right moment. Sugar starts to color at 310°F; at 338° it starts to burn; and it will be completely black at 350°. The total cooking time is about 10 to 15 minutes.

Pay attention: it's hot and sets quickly. Don't

let yourself get distracted when making caramel. Hot sugar can cause serious burns. Once the color is right, quickly pour the caramel into the molds, dividing it as evenly as possible. Ceramic molds can be individual size, or large enough for an entire recipe of custard. I prefer flat-bottom molds with straight sides. They produce a good-looking *crème caramel*, and they unmold more easily than molds with smaller bottoms and sloping sides.

As you pour the caramel into the molds, you'll notice that the caramel in the last mold filled will be darker than that in the first. That's because the sugar continues to cook from the residual heat in the pan. You want to work quickly, so the caramel won't overcook before you

get it into the molds. Once you've poured all the caramel, pick up each mold and tilt it so that the caramel covers the bottom evenly and starts to run up the sides. Use a hot pad or towel to hold the molds—they will be hot. If the caramel is too light or too dark, soak the molds to remove the caramel and make a new batch. You haven't lost anything at this point, and the experience will help you find the right

CREME CARAMEL

CARAMEL:
½ cup water
¾ cup sugar

BASIC CUSTARD:
Yields 3 cups custard
(enough for eight
½-cup molds or
one 1-quart mold).

2⅓ cups whole milk
3 whole eggs
3 egg yolks
½ cup sugar
2 tsp. vanilla extract
(or ½ vanilla bean,
split and scraped)
Pinch of salt



Stir, don't whisk, the custard base. Use a regular spoon to mix the sugar, eggs, and milk to avoid beating in air bubbles that can ruin the custard's texture.

color. (See *Fine Cooking* #1, pp. 35–39, for more information on making caramel.)

STIR GENTLY, BAKE GENTLY

To make the custard, heat the milk until it just barely simmers; boiling milk can curdle the eggs. While the milk is heating, gently combine the eggs, sugar, vanilla extract, and salt in a bowl. Use a small spoon—not a whisk—to mix the eggs. You want just to combine the ingredients without beating in any air that can leave bubbles in your custard. Slowly pour the heated milk into the egg mixture without splashing, stirring gently all the while.

Pour the custard through a fine sieve into the caramel-lined molds, filling to just below the rim. The sieve will remove any undissolved sugar and egg particles and ensure the smoothest possible custard. Let the custard base sit in the molds undisturbed for about five minutes to allow any bubbles to collapse. With the tip of a small knife, gently deflate any remaining bubbles clinging to the edge of the molds.

Heat the oven to 300°. Cooking the egg-rich custards at a relatively low temperature helps prevent curdling. Set the filled molds in a flat, shallow pan, not more than ½ to 1 inch deeper than your molds, to use as a water bath. Pour hot tap water into the pan until it reaches ½ to ¾ of the way up the sides of the molds. Cover the pan with aluminum foil to keep the tops of the custards from forming a skin, but take care that the foil doesn't actually touch the custards.

Cooking time depends on the size and thickness of the molds. Large molds need more time than small ones, and thick-walled molds take longer than thin ones. Delicate ½-cup molds cook in 25 to 30 minutes; thick-walled ½-cup molds need 40 to



Straining the custard directly into the molds is added insurance that your custard will be smooth and creamy.



Pop the bubbles for the smoothest custards. Use the tip of a paring knife.



Test for doneness towards the edge of the mold, not in the center. The custards should still be slightly liquid in the center when you take them from the oven. They'll finish cooking as they cool.

50 minutes. Experience will teach you how long it takes to bake custards in your particular molds, and in your oven.

Be careful not to overcook your custards. Once their soft texture has been ruined, there's no way to get it back. Slow cooking and cooling gives you the best chance of achieving quivering perfect *crème caramel*.

Testing for texture. To test for doneness, slip a paring knife into the custard halfway between the edge of the mold and the center. If the knife comes out clean, the custard is ready to come out of the oven. The center should still be slightly liquid. Remove the water bath from the oven and loosen the foil to vent the steam, but keep the custards covered. Leave them in the water bath to cool at room temperature. The custards will finish cooking as they cool.

If your knife comes out completely clean from the center of the mold (rather than halfway between the center and the edge) and the custard seems fairly solid, then the custard is already fully cooked and should be cooled quickly on a rack. Air cooling is faster than cooling in the water bath and will minimize further cooking. Overcooked custards begin to puff after they set and will form a skin even if covered.

When the custards reach room temperature, cover them tightly with plastic wrap (again to prevent a skin from forming) and refrigerate them for at least 24 hours. This resting period allows the custards to set completely and for the caramel to melt, making unmolding easier.

Just before serving, remove the molds from the refrigerator. Carefully run your thinnest paring knife around the edge of the mold to loosen the custard. Keep the knife blade flat against the side of the mold. Cutting into the custard will result in ragged edges and leave pieces of custard floating in the sauce. Tap the mold with the heel of your hand to finish loosening the custard. If you see caramel sauce between the custard and the side of the mold, you know your custard is loose.

Invert a serving plate on top of the mold, and turn the whole thing upside down. The custard should release itself. If suction prevents the custard from releasing, gently tap on the bottom of the mold or gently hit the heel of your hand against the side of the mold. Be sure to let all the melted caramel drizzle from the mold over the custard.

Look closely at the texture of the custard and take mental notes for fine-tuning your technique. The custard should be perfectly smooth with very few air bubbles. Gently hit the heel of your hand against the serving plate. The custard should quiver—the sign of a silky, smooth texture. A custard that's underdone will break in the unmolding or won't hold its shape

Variations on *crème caramel*

Make coffee-flavored *crème caramel*, like the one pictured below, by dissolving instant espresso in the milk. To make citrus- or ginger-flavored custard, heat the milk to just below a simmer, add the flavoring, and remove from the heat. Cover the pot and let the milk steep for about 30 minutes. Gently reheat the milk to a slow simmer before combining it with the eggs and sugar.

CITRUS

Zest of 1 large orange and zest of 2 lemons. Reduce vanilla extract to ½ tsp.

GINGER

2 Tbs. grated fresh ginger. Reduce vanilla extract to ½ tsp.

COFFEE

2 Tbs. instant espresso granules. Reduce vanilla extract to 1 tsp. Add 2 Tbs. coffee-flavored liqueur (I prefer Tia Maria) to the egg-sugar mixture.



Photo: Ellen Silverman

on the plate. An overdone custard will barely wiggle, even when the plate is hit hard.

To develop your technique, make *crème caramel* and its variations your specialty for several months. Each batch will teach you something new about the amazing egg and its ability to turn sugar and milk and a bit of flavoring into a truly perfect dessert.

Susan McCreight Lindeborg started her cooking career in pursuit of the perfect flan by cooking at La Fonda Hotel in Santa Fe. Later positions include chef at L'Etoile in Madison, Wisconsin, and pastry chef under Bob Kinkead at Twenty-One Federal in Washington, DC. She is now the chef at the Morrison-Clark Inn, a small, historic hotel in Washington, DC. ♦