

BREAD PUDDING SOUFFLE WITH WHISKEY SAUCE

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From COMMANDER'S KITCHEN by Ti Martin and Jamie Shannon, Commander's Palace, New Orleans, LA

When I eat Bread Pudding Soufflé I always think of the Commander's saying, "If it ain't broke, fix it anyway." Bread pudding was already near perfection, but we combined Creole bread pudding with the light texture of a meringue & ended up with the restaurant's signature dessert, the single most sought-after dish in our family's restaurant history. The whiskey sauce itself is divine but particularly so when generously poured over the piping hot soufflé. Take it from me, this is no light dessert. Make the bread pudding & sauce in advance, the meringue just before assembling and baking.

Bread Pudding:

3/4 C sugar	1 tsp ground cinnamon
Pinch freshly grated nutmeg	3 medium eggs
1 C heavy cream	1/3 C raisins
1 tsp pure vanilla extract (use a high-quality extract, not an imitation)	
5 C day-old French bread, cut into 1" cubes (see Note below)	

Whiskey sauce:

1 1/2 C heavy cream	2 tsp cornstarch
2TBS cold water	1/3 C sugar
1/3 C bourbon	

Meringue:

9 medium egg whites, at room temperature	
1/4 tsp cream of tartar	3/4 C sugar

To make pudding: Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease 8" square baking pan - combine sugar, cinnamon, & nutmeg in large bowl. Beat in eggs till smooth, then work in heavy cream. Add vanilla, then bread cubes. Allow bread to soak up custard. Scatter raisins in greased pan - top with egg mixture, to prevent raisins from burning. Bake 25-30 minutes or till pudding is golden & is firm. If toothpick comes out clean, it's done. It should be moist, not runny or dry. Let cool to room temperature.

To make sauce: bring cream to boil - combine cornstarch & water - add to boiling cream, stirring constantly - return to boil, then reduce heat & cook, stirring, about 30 seconds, being careful not to burn mixture. Add sugar & bourbon - stir. Let cool to room temperature. Preheat oven to 350°F & butter six 6-ounce ceramic ramekins.

To make the meringue: be sure to use a clean bowl & whisk + that egg whites are completely free of yolk. This dish needs a good, stiff meringue & egg whites whip better if the chill is off them. In large bowl or mixer, whip egg whites & cream of tartar till foamy. Gradually add sugar & continue whipping till shiny & thick. Test with clean spoon. If whites stand up stiff, the meringue's ready. Don't over- whip, or whites will break down & the soufflé will not work.

In large bowl, break half the bread pudding into pieces by hand or with a spoon. Gently fold in 1/4 the meringue (don't lose the air in the whites). Place a portion of this mixture in each of the ramekins. Place remaining bread pudding in bowl, break into pieces & carefully fold in rest of the meringue. Top off soufflés with this lighter mixture, to about 1 1/2" over top edge of ramekin. With spoon, smooth & shape tops into a dome over ramekin rim. Bake immediately 20 minutes or till golden brown. Serve immediately. Using a spoon at table, poke a hole in top of each soufflé & spoon in room-temperature whiskey sauce.

Note: New Orleans French bread is very light & tender. Outside New Orleans, use only a light bread. If bread is too dense, recipe won't work. We suggest Italian bread as most comparable.

Chef Jamie's Tip: New Orleanians like their spiked foods well spiked, which is why the whiskey sauce in this recipe uses what might seem like a generous amount of bourbon. Cut the amount of bourbon if you prefer. A standard crème anglaise would make a good alcohol-free alternative sauce.

Makes 6 servings.