

PASSOVER MERINGUE CAKE WITH WHIPPED CREAM AND BERRIES

For the meringue cake:

- 1/2 vanilla bean, optional *
- 1 1/4 cups superfine sugar or regular sugar (about 250 g), whizzed in food processor
- 5 egg whites, cold (about 150 ml)
- Pinch Kosher salt
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice

For the cream and berries filling:

- 1 cup whipping or heavy cream
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1/2 vanilla pod, optional*
- About 2 to 2 1/2 cups fresh strawberries or any fruit you have, cut into small pieces
- 1/2 cup unsweetened coconut flakes, toasted (optional)
- Mint leaves or other edible garnishes (optional)
- Confectioners' sugar (optional)

*Vanilla extract is not used during Passover since it contains alcohol

Directions:

Preheat the oven to 225 degrees. Put a sheet of parchment paper on a heavy-duty rimmed baking sheet or cookie sheet; you can add a dab of butter to the bottom of the paper to hold it in place. Using a pencil and an overturned bowl or plate as a template, lightly draw an 8-inch circle in the middle of the parchment; set aside.

Cut the vanilla bean in half lengthwise (if using) and, use a small, sharp knife to scrape the seeds out. Place the sugar in a bowl and add the vanilla seeds and mix to distribute.

In the bowl of a standing mixer using the whip attachment, beat the egg whites and the salt on medium-low speed until frothy, about 1 minute. Increase the speed to medium-high and beat until soft peaks form, about 1 1/2 to 2 minutes. Add the sugar very gradually, sprinkling one tablespoon at a time into the bowl, continuing to beat on medium-high (not high), until the meringue is glossy and holds soft peaks, a total of about 3 minutes. You can stop the mixer once or twice during this time to scrape down the sides (sugar that is not dissolved or combined can cause the meringue to weep later, so be sure it is all mixed in). Add the lemon juice and beat just until combined, about another minute.

Using a spoon or soft spatula, carefully spread the meringue mixture into the marked circle. You don't need to be overly precise. Use your silicon spatula or spoon to create a slight indent in the center (which will later be filled with whipped cream and fruit), pushing the meringue mixture out away from the center towards the sides.

Put the pan on the middle shelf in the oven and bake for 1 1/2 hours, or until the meringue feels crisp and dry on the outside. (Do not open the oven door frequently). Turn off the oven (and oven light if on) and keep the meringue in the turned-off oven for about 2 to 3 hours to dry out further and so that it cools down very slowly; it can stay in the oven overnight.

When totally cool, remove from the oven and carefully remove the meringue from the parchment paper and put it on a cake stand or serving plate.

Just before you are ready to serve the cake, use an electric mixer to whip the cream and vanilla in a bowl until soft peaks form. Add the sugar and whip until stiff peaks just form — be careful not to overwhip the cream.

Fill the middle of the meringue cake with the whipped cream and arrange the fruit and coconut (if using) on top. Do not add the cream and fruit to the cake more than 15 to 20 minutes before serving. Cut with a large, sharp knife.

Tips for Making Meringue

Humidity is not a friend of meringue. If it's rainy or a particularly humid day be sure to keep all your equipment and ingredients cold. And you will need to keep the meringue in the oven for a minimum of 3 hours to properly dry out.

Be sure all of your equipment – ingredient bowls, mixer, whisk, spatulas, etc., are very clean (use a little vinegar to wipe down the mixing bowl and whisk.)

If you don't have superfine sugar, measure regular granulated sugar out first, then put it into the food processor and blitz it until superfine (but not powdery).

Separating egg whites from yolks is much easier while the eggs are very cold. But after separating, if you've got time, let them come to room temperature, as they will then whisk better.

If possible, use the weight and volume given in the recipe for your sugar and egg whites. Measuring the volume of the five egg whites (you want about 150 to 155 ml) is an especially good idea if using local Vineyard eggs, which tend to vary in size. Use a Pyrex glass measure.

While making the meringue, do your best to make sure all the sugar is dissolved and well incorporated into the whites, as undissolved sugar crystals can cause the meringue to weep in the oven. Scrape the bottom and sides of the bowl a couple times during mixing if necessary.

Use any leftover meringue to form mini meringue cookies by placing a tablespoon dollop on the prepared parchment alongside the cake.

Use an oven thermometer to check the temperature of your oven; some ovens run very hot and ideally your meringue will cook best at 225F. (But don't worry if the meringue turns slightly golden during cooking, it will still be good.)

Credit: Martha's Vineyard Magazine

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