

TRIPLE LAYER COCONUT CAKE

After the children were all in bed, James' and my nighttime routine included watching the Food Network together. When one of the network stars, Bobby Flay, put out a cookbook with some of his recipes we were first in line. This is a riff on his competition winning Coconut Cake which I've tweaked over time and have added some additional notes and hints for greater success each time. It's light, not overly sweet, and coconutty in every bite.

The Ingredients

The Cake

- 1 cup whole milk, at room temperature
- 6 egg whites, at room temperature (reserve 4 yolks for the filling)
- 1 vanilla bean, split lengthwise and seeds removed
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 2¼ cups cake flour, plus more for the pans
- 1¾ cups granulated sugar
- 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 12 tablespoons (1½ sticks) unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch cubes and slightly cold

The Coconut Simple Syrup

- ¼ cup granulated sugar
- 1½ cups water
- ¾ cup sweetened coconut flakes

The Coconut Custard (made in advance)

- 2 cups of whole milk
- 1 vanilla bean, seeds scraped
- 5 large egg yolks
- ½ cup sugar
- 3½ tablespoons cornstarch
- 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract (rum based)
- 1 teaspoon coconut extract
- ¾ cup very cold, heavy whipping cream (reserved for assembly)

The Coconut Cream Filling

2 tablespoons water
2 teaspoons unflavored gelatin powder
1 cup heavy whipping cream, chilled and divided
2 tablespoons granulated sugar
1 teaspoon good vanilla extract
2 cups Coconut Custard

The Coconut Buttercream

1 (16 ounce) package full fat cream cheese, at room temperature
16 tablespoons (2 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature
5½ cups powdered sugar
¼ cup custard filling
1 teaspoons vanilla extract
1 teaspoon coconut extract
Pinch of fine salt
2 cups sweetened coconut flakes, plain or toasted (reserved for assembly)

The Method

The Cake

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Grease and flour three 8-inch round cake pans and line the bottoms with parchment paper.
2. In the bowl of a heavy-duty mixer, fitted with the paddle attachment, mix the cake flour sugar, baking powder, and salt until well combined. Add the cubed butter and beat until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs. In a separate bowl, whisk the milk, egg whites, vanilla seeds, and extract until the egg whites are broken down and the liquids are fully integrated. With the mixer on low, slowly pour the liquid mixture into the flour mixture. Increase the speed to medium and beat for 2 minutes, stopping the mixer occasionally to scrape the sides and bottom of the bowl. The batter will be pale and fluffy. Pour equally into the prepared pans and bake for 22 to 25 minutes or until the center springs back when lightly touched. Cool in the pans for 10 minutes. Finish cooling on a wire rack. When cool, wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate or freeze for at least 24 hours and up to 3 days.
3. When ready to assemble, remove the plastic wrap and parchment paper. Level off each cake top with a serrated knife.

The Coconut Simple Syrup

4. In a small saucepan, add the water and sugar. Bring to a boil. Remove from the heat, add the coconut and allow to steep for at least 30 minutes and up to 4 hours. Strain out the coconut. In a clean saucepan, boil over medium heat until slightly reduced, about 5 minutes. Allow to cool and refrigerate in an air-tight container until ready to use.
5. When ready to assemble, brush the syrup over the top of each leveled cake layer.

The Coconut Custard

6. Over low heat, in a medium saucepan, add the milks, scraped vanilla bean, and seeds. Bring to a simmer. In a separate bowl, whisk together the yolks, sugar, and cornstarch until lightened. Whisking constantly, slowly add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the milk mixture into the yolk mixture. Repeat until all the milk mixture is whisked into the bowl. Return to the saucepan. Over medium heat, whisk constantly until thickened. Pour into a clean bowl, remove the vanilla bean, and whisk in the vanilla and coconut extracts. Cover with plastic wrap, placing it directly onto the surface of the custard to prevent it from forming a 'skin' while cooling.
7. When ready to assemble the cake, whip $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of the chilled custard with $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of cold whipping cream for the filling until light and fluffy.

The Coconut Cream Filling

8. In a small ramekin add the water, stir in the gelatin and let it rest until fully absorbed, about 5 minutes. Add an inch of water in a small saucepan and bring to a boil. Place the ramekin in the boiling water to melt the gelatin, stirring constantly, at least 1 minute. (Do not let boiling water get into the ramekin.) Remove the ramekin and stir in 2 tablespoons of the chilled whipping cream.
9. In a medium bowl, using a hand-held mixer, whip the remaining cream, sugar, and vanilla until soft peaks form. With the mixer still on, pour in the gelatin and cream mixture from the ramekin and beat until everything is well incorporated and stiff peaks form.
10. In a large bowl, add the coconut custard. Stir one fourth of the whipped cream mixture into the custard. Carefully fold in the rest of the whipped cream until fully mixed together. Pour onto the cake layers (supported by cellophane outer wrap) and refrigerate at least 2 hours and up to 24 hours, covered with plastic wrap.

The Coconut Buttercream

11. In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, beat the cream cheese, butter, and powdered sugar until light and fluffy, about 4 minutes. Add the coconut custard, extracts, and pinch of salt. Beat until smooth and spreadable. If too thick, add a tablespoon of milk at a time. If too thin, add additional powdered sugar.

The Assembly

12. Lay one round of cake, brushed with simple syrup, on a cake board or cake plate. Pipe the buttercream around the inside edge of cake layers to contain and support the filling. Add half the filling. Repeat with a second layer. Add the final cake round with the cut side down. Frost the top and then sides of the cake. Press the coconut flakes (either plain or toasted) onto the sides of the frosted cake and sprinkle on the top. Refrigerate the finished cake for 4 hours and up to 24 hours to allow it to set before serving.

Tips

- The cake will last, wrapped in plastic wrap, in the refrigerator for up to 3 days. Simply allow it to come to room temperature before serving. To freeze, place the frosted cake in the freezer until frozen solid. Wrap the cake tightly in plastic wrap and freeze for up to 1 month.



