

A Trio of Treats for Valentine's Day



by Barbara Van Bogard
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The origins of Valentine's Day are murky, lost in the annals of history. One theory is it commemorated the anniversary of the death of Saint Valentine, somewhere around 270 AD. Another theory is the Christian church decided to place Saint Valentine's feast day in mid-February to normalize the pagan celebration called Lupercalia, a festival dedicated to Faunus, the Roman god of agriculture, as well as Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome.

Whatever the true origins of Valentine's Day might be, it has come to be known as the holiday that celebrates love. Flowers, dinners, candy and cards have marked this occasion ever since. In keeping with the theme of displays of affection, what could be better than a trio of baked treats?

As the great gastronome and New York Times food writer Craig Claiborne once said, "For those who love it, cooking is at once child's play and adult joy. And cooking done with care is an act of love."

One Pan Fudgy Brownies

— adapted from "365 Great Cookies and Brownies" by Bonnie Tandy Leblang and Joanne Lamb Hayes

2 sticks (8 ounces) unsalted butter
¾ cup unsweetened cocoa powder
2 cups white sugar
4 eggs at room temperature
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
1 cup flour
½ teaspoon salt
2 cups semisweet chocolate chips

Preheat oven to 350. Grease a 9 by 13 inch pan. Melt butter in medium-sized saucepan over low heat. Add cocoa powder and stir until well blended. Mix in sugar. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Stir in vanilla, then flour and salt. Do not overbeat. Stir in chocolate chips. Turn into prepared pan, leveling surface.

Bake 20 to 25 minutes or until a toothpick inserted near center comes out with just a few moist crumbs. Cool completely on rack before cutting into squares.

Orange Chocolate Mousse

— adapted from "The Prairie Homestead" by Jill Winger

2 cups heavy cream
4 egg yolk at room temperature
4 tablespoons maple syrup
3 tablespoons orange juice
3 tablespoons orange zest
6 ounces semisweet chocolate chips, melted and slightly cooled
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Whisk the yolks, syrup, orange juice and zest together in a small bowl. Heat ¾ cup cream in a saucepan over medium low heat until it's steamy but not boiling. Slowly whisk the hot cream into the egg yolk mixture and return it back to the saucepan and cook over low heat until it's thick enough to coat the back of a spoon. Mix in melted chocolate and vanilla extract. Chill.

Once chocolate custard has cooled completely, whip the remaining 1¼ cups of cream until stiff peaks form. Fold the custard into the whipped cream until it's completely blended and no longer streaky. Spoon mixture into dessert cups, ramekins or, even better, martini glasses, and chill an additional 30 minutes.

Garnish if desired with additional orange zest, sifted cocoa powder, chocolate chunks or whipped cream.

An easy and elegant way to serve eight.

Easy Cheesecake Bars

Preheat oven to 350. Butter one 9 by 13 inch pan.

Mix together well in a bowl one box yellow cake mix, 1 cup chopped pecans, 4 ounces softened butter and one egg. Pat into prepared pan. Mix one pound powdered sugar, 8 ounces softened cream cheese and two eggs. Spread on top of prepared crust. Bake 40 to 45 minutes. This is so easy and delicious!