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Fleur de Sel and Smoked Salt Caramels

Makes about 64 caramels

Like the inventor of the airplane, the creator of *fleur de sel* caramels is contested. Was it George Cayley, father of aerodynamics, who invented it in 1799; or Jean-Marie Le Bris in his horse-drawn "albatross artificial"; or John Montgomery in his glider; or Otto Lillienthal, Octave Chanute, or Percy Pilcher? Some say it was the Wright brothers. The arguments tend to get political and technical. The French have been making *fleur de sel* caramels for some time. Some say salted caramel came from the New World, where salt water was used as a confectionary. But it's all but certain they never made use of great salt. However, the Americans, prone to exaggeration, have succeeded in burning the sugar to the point where the caramels tread somewhere between a dessert topping and a meal. Blend burnt caramel with good salt and little stars of flavor glimmer from within the impenetrable vastness of the caramel. Look skyward. Machines for soaring among the stars might never have been invented had the salted burnt caramel come first.

- 1 cup heavy cream
- 5 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into pieces
- 1-1/2 cups sugar
- 1/4 cup agave syrup or invert sugar (see sidebar)
- 1/4 cup water
- 2 three-finger pinches *fleur de sel*
- 2 three-finger pinches smoked salt, such as *Halen Môn* oak smoked

Line the bottom and sides of an 8-inch-square baking pan with parchment paper or foil and spray with oil; set aside.

Bring the cream and butter to a simmer in a small saucepan; remove from the heat and set aside.

In a medium-sized heavy saucepan over medium heat, heat the sugar, agave syrup, and water, stirring until the sugar dissolves. Boil, gently swirling the pan, until the sugar turns a dark golden color (350°F on a candy thermometer).

Carefully stir in the cream mixture (the mixture will bubble vigorously) and boil, stirring often, until the liquid reaches 248°F, about 12 minutes. At that point, a drop of the mixture dribbled into a glass of cold water will form a ball that will be firm enough to lift up but flexible enough to flatten between your fingers (soft-ball stage).

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Remove the sugar from the heat and quickly stir in the *fleur de sel*. Immediately pour into the prepared baking pan. Sprinkle with the smoked salt. Allow to cool at room temperature until firm, about 1-1/2 hours more.

Invert onto a cutting board and peel off the paper. Cut into 1-inch squares and wrap each piece in a 4-inch square of wax paper or cellophane, twisting the ends to close.

NOTE:

INVERT SUGAR; If you can't find agave syrup, you can use invert sugar instead. It's very easy to make, and assures your caramel will come out smooth and silky. Mix 3 cups granulated sugar, 1-1/2 cups water, and the juice of 1/2 lemon in a saucepan over medium-high heat. Bring to a boil, then lower the heat and simmer for 30 minutes. The resulting invert sugar liquid can be stored indefinitely in a small plastic container.