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CRÈME CAMEL

Makes 4 servings

Crème caramel is a kissing cousin to *crème anglaise*, a sexy little custard cooked in a caramel bath and upended so that the amber syrup flows around it to form a pool of luscious sweetness. This dessert minx also goes by the alias "flan."

FOR THE CARAMEL:

1 drop lemon juice
3/4 cup (150 g) sugar
3 tablespoons (45 ml) water
1 large bowl ice water

FOR THE CUSTARD:

2 cups (480 ml) whole milk
1/4 teaspoon (1.5 g) salt
1 teaspoon (5 ml) vanilla bean paste
1/2 cup (100 g) sugar
4 eggs
Berries, to garnish, to taste
Whipped cream, for garnish, to taste

PROCEDURE FOR THE CARAMEL:

1. In a heavy-bottomed saucepan over medium heat, combine the sugar, water, and lemon juice, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon. The sugar will melt and caramelize quickly, so keep stirring and adjusting the heat; you want the sugar to melt evenly and to have a golden brown color. Make sure your lighting is very good, because it can be hard to see the exact hue of your caramel.
2. When the color reaches a dark amber, immediately remove the saucepan from the heat and gently place it over the ice water to stop the caramelization process. Take care not to splash any water into your caramel.
3. Immediately spoon a small amount of caramel into each of four 8-ounce ramekins and swirl to create an even layer. Set aside.

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PROCEDURE FOR THE CUSTARD:

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F (175°C).
2. In a large saucepan over medium-low heat, bring the milk, salt, and vanilla paste just to a simmer.
3. In the bowl of an electric mixer on medium speed, beat the sugar and eggs.
4. Slowly pour the hot milk mixture along the side of the bowl and into the eggs. Whisk until well combined.
5. Return the sauce to the saucepan over medium heat and whisk until the mixture thickens to the point that it just coats the back of a spoon.
6. Strain the custard mixture. I prefer to strain the custard into a large measuring cup with a spout to make pouring easier.
7. Place the ramekins in a deep baking dish (I use a casserole dish or a deep brownie pan) and place the baking dish on a sheet pan. At this point you can proceed on a kitchen countertop if you have steady hands; or you can choose to pull an oven rack out far enough to use that as a work surface. In the latter case, you have to work quickly to keep the temperature of the oven from dipping to low. If this is how you choose to proceed, increase the oven temperature to 375°F (190°C), and once you're done filling the ramekins and the water bath, turn the temperature down to 350°F (175°C).
8. Pour the custard mixture evenly into the ramekins, to just below the tops.
9. Pour hot water in the baking dish to create a bath for the ramekins. The water should reach about three-quarters up the outside of the ramekins. Pour the water slowly so that it doesn't splash into the custard. Carefully place the baking dish inside the oven.
10. Bake for 30 to 40 minutes, until set.
11. Remove from the oven and allow to cool completely at room temperature. You can keep the ramekins in the water bath—they will cool more slowly, but it's safer than pulling hot ramekins from scalding water with clunky oven mitts. Transfer the ramekins to the refrigerator to chill for several hours.
12. To unmold the crème caramel, slowly and evenly run a very thin pairing knife along the inside edge of each ramekin, keeping the knife flat against the edge to keep from cutting into the custard. Place a plate on top of each ramekin and invert the two together so that the ramekin is sitting upside down on the plate. Gently shake the ramekin, until it slides out.
13. Serve with berries and whipped cream.