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Better-Than-It

Vanilla Bean Frozen Custard on Oatmeal Cookies Dipped in Dark Chocolate

Makes 12 sandwiches

The It's-It company began selling scoops of vanilla ice cream sandwiched between old-fashioned oatmeal cookies cloaked in chocolate at San Francisco's Playland at the Beach in 1928. By the time I moved to the area in 1978, the It's -It was a well-established local phenomenon. I've filled my version of the novelty with a not-overly-sweet vanilla frozen custard.

Don't be put off by the recipe's many steps: Each is reasonably quick and easy, and one bite will convince you it was all worthwhile. I half-dip the sandwiches for a pretty finish. If you wish to fully dip them, double the Chocolate Shell recipe.

Vanilla Bean Frozen Custard

4 large egg yolks
1 tablespoon plus 1/3 cup (79 g) granulated sugar
1-1/2 cups (360 ml) milk, whole or 2%
3 tablespoons golden syrup, inverted sugar syrup or light agave nectar
1 tablespoon tapioca starch
1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
2 cups (480 ml) heavy cream
1 vanilla bean, split lengthwise
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

Whisk the yolks with 1 tablespoon of the sugar in a medium bowl until smooth and slightly thickened. Set aside.

Whisk 1/2 cup (120 ml) of the milk with the syrup, tapioca, salt, and the remaining 1/3 cup (67 g) sugar in a medium saucepan until no lumps remain. Stir in the cream and the remaining 1 cup (340 ml) milk. Use a paring knife to scrape in the seeds from the vanilla bean; toss in the pod. Heat the mixture over medium-high heat, stirring with a heatproof spatula, until it begins to steam and slightly bubble at the edges.

Ladle 1 cup (240 ml) of the hot mixture into the yolks in a stream as you whisk the mixture to prevent the yolks from scrambling. Whisk the mixture back into the saucepan and cook at a slow simmer, stirring with a spatula, until the mixture thickens enough to thickly coat a spoon, 1 to 2 minutes longer.

Strain the mixture through a fine-mesh strainer into a metal bowl. (Rinse and save the pod for another use, or discard.) Stir in the vanilla extract.

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Set the bowl over a larger bowl of ice and water. Stir occasionally until the mixture is cool, taking care not to slosh water into the bowl. Cover and refrigerate until very cold, at least 2 hours. Transfer the bowl to the freezer for the last half hour before spinning it.

Freeze the mixture in an ice cream maker according to the manufacturer's directions. When it is ready, transfer the ice cream to a chilled container. Cover and freeze until firm, at least 4 hours or overnight.

Oatmeal Cookies

3/4 cup (100 g) white whole wheat, whole wheat, or oat flour
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
1/2 cup (1 stick / 113 g) unsalted butter, softened
2/3 cup packed (134 g) light brown sugar
1 large egg
1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
1-1/2 cups (180 g) rolled oats
1/2 cup (80 g) raisins (optional)

Preheat the oven to 350°F (175°C) with racks in the upper and lower thirds of the oven. Line two baking sheets with parchment paper or silicone baking mats. Whisk together the flour, baking soda, baking powder, and salt in a small bowl.

Put the butter and brown sugar in a mixing bowl and use a wooden spoon or a handheld electric mixer to mix until they are creamy. Add the egg and vanilla and mix until smooth. Stir in the flour mixture just until everything is well combined, then stir in the oats and raisins, if using.

Spoon or scoop the batter in tablespoons onto the prepared baking sheets, spacing them evenly to make 24 cookies. Press the cookies with lightly dampened fingers to flatten them slightly – they will spread further as they bake. Bake until the cookies are light golden around the edges, 8 to 10 minutes, rotating the pans top to bottom and front to back halfway through baking.

Let the cookies cool on the pan for 5 minutes, then transfer them directly to a wire rack to cool completely, sliding a spatula under them if they do not release easily.

SANDWICH!

Form sandwiches using Method #1:

1. Pair the cookies with like-size mates.

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2. Place a 1/4-cup (60 ml) scoop of ice cream (1/3 cup / 80 ml) for large cookies, ice cream quantity permitting) between the bottoms of each cookie pair. For the neatest scoops, use a measuring cup with straight sides, about the diameter of the cookies, to measure out the ice cream. Fill the measure according to the recipe, and use a knife or offset spatula to release the scoop onto a cookie bottom.
3. Press gently to squeeze the ice cream slightly beyond the edge of the cookies. If desired, use a small offset spatula or the flat side of a dinner knife to smooth the ice cream flush with the edge.
4. Freeze until firm, at least 2 hours, before dipping. Dip the sandwiches to coat them halfway in chocolate following the instructions below.

Chocolate Shell

Makes enough to half-dip about 12 sandwiches or fully coat 6 to 8 sandwiches.

This chocolate coating could not be easier. A bit of oil keeps the chocolate smooth for dipping, then magically helps it to harden to a brittle coating in only a few minutes in the freezer. The elegant chocolate layer shatters beautifully when you bite into the sandwich, melting smoothly on the tongue.

I prefer an extra-bittersweet chocolate for this – 64 to 72 percent cacao – but choose whatever chocolate you like, from milk to dark. For a white chocolate shell, increase the oil to 1/4 cup (60 ml), and choose a good-quality white chocolate, such as El Rey, Ghirardelli, or Guittard (not chips).

The sandwiches should be firmly frozen before dipping. To decorate the sandwiches, press chopped and toasted nuts coconut, sprinkles, or other decorations onto the dipped sandwiches before the chocolate firms. Any remaining Chocolate Shell can be melted and served over ice cream, or can be stirred into ice cream as it spins for a *stracciatella* (chocolate chip) effect.

1 pound (454 g) chocolate, chopped
3 tablespoons neutral vegetable oil or coconut oil

Choose a metal bowl (for the stovetop) or microwave-safe bowl that is deep enough to submerge a sandwich and wide enough to easily dip into. (For the microwave, a 4-cup / 1-L glass measuring cup works well.)

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Melt the chocolate with the oil in a double boiler or bowl placed over, but not touching, about an inch (2-1/2 cm) of simmering water in a saucepan. Alternatively, melt the chocolate with the oil in the microwave until you can stir it smooth. You do not need to get the chocolate very hot – just warm enough to melt when you stir it. Set aside until the chocolate is just barely warm and still smooth and fluid.

To dip the sandwiches, have a parchment-lined baking sheet in the freezer and the melted chocolate close at hand. (If it becomes too firm to dip, gently warm the chocolate until fluid.)

Dunk a sandwich into the chocolate to coat half or all of the sandwich, using a small offset spatula as an aid to paint on the chocolate and scrape off any excess. Transfer the sandwich to the baking sheet in the freezer. Repeat to coat the remaining sandwiches. Freeze until the chocolate sets, about 15 minutes, before individually wrapping the sandwiches or layering them between sheets of parchment or waxed paper in an airtight container.

Take it Easy

Substitute oatmeal cookies and vanilla ice cream.

Dress It Up

Immediately after dipping each sandwich, dunk the soft chocolate into a bowl of chopped toasted nuts.