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Strawberry Mousse

Serves 4

This lightly textured dessert with a lovely pink color bursts with strawberry flavors. It's a dessert that may be made ahead of time – a godsend when preparing a special meal. The flavors of the fresh berries are concentrated through a quick reduction process, then brightened with a little lemon. It's the type of dessert that's eaten slowly – one swoon-worthy spoonful at a time.

1 quart strawberries
1/2 cup sugar
1 lemon
2 teaspoons (1 pkg) unflavored gelatin
Pinch of salt
1 cup heavy cream
1/4 cup powdered sugar
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

Directions:

1. Rinse and pat dry the strawberries. Choose the four best-looking strawberries and set aside as a garnish. Hull the remaining strawberries and coarsely cut into quarters.
2. Place the strawberries in a blender or food processor and puree. Transfer the strawberry puree to a small saucepan; add the sugar, and stir.
3. Juice 1 large lemon into a small bowl. Sprinkle the gelatin on top and allow the granules to soften, about 5 minutes.
4. Cook the strawberry puree over medium heat until the puree is reduced by about half to concentrate the flavors. Stir frequently to prevent scorching. (The kitchen will be filled with a great strawberry fragrance – inhale deeply!) Add the lemon juice, gelatin, and salt. Stir to further dissolve the gelatin. Allow the mixture to cool completely. (This strawberry base may be made ahead of time and refrigerated at this stage. Bring to room temperature, or warm slightly to a liquid stage if it has gelled while chilling.)
5. Place the heavy cream, powdered sugar, and vanilla extract in a deep mixing bowl and whip to the soft peaks stage. Reserve four nice dollops of the whipped cream for garnishing in a separate bowl. Fold a quarter of the whipped cream into the strawberry mixture to lighten it. Add the remaining whipped cream in three more additions taking care to fold instead of stirring; this will retain the air bubbles, loft, and light texture.
6. Spoon the mousse into glass serving dishes. Chill for at least 4 hours or up to a day ahead of time. Top with the reserved whipped cream and individual whole berries. Serve and enjoy.