

Diane Forley



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SPRING begs for light fruit desserts. This variation on a traditional dacquoise, which usually has layers of buttercream, is much lighter, using no flour. It's very efficient, too: the egg yolks that are separated and set aside while making the baked meringue disks are used in the sabayon, and so is the poaching liquid for the pears. There's no waste.

In a twist, I've added almond paste to the poaching liquid, which flavors and perfumes the pears. There's a fine play of textures, with the meringue giving the dessert a nice crunch, and the sabayon adding a wonderful creaminess.

There are a few little tricks to this recipe. A lot of sabayon recipes call for adding wine directly to the egg yolks, which is easier. But my way, heating the eggs in a double boiler, or bain-marie, lightens the yolks and also cooks them, an important point for people worried about the health risks of raw eggs.

Remove the meringue from the oven while it still rebounds slightly when you poke it softly, because it will still dry out a bit while cooling. If the parchment paper sticks

This is the fifth of eight columns by Diane Forley, the chef and owner of the Manhattan restaurant Verbera. Her collaborator on these columns is William Grimes.

A lighter variation on a rich French theme.

to it, rub a damp napkin or paper towel back and forth over the stuck part until it loosens. Cut out the meringue rounds before the meringue cools completely, because the meringue can crack.

Adding sugar to the almonds when you grind them is also a bit of a trick. When the almonds warm up, they start to release their oils, and if the sugar isn't there to absorb them, the almonds tend to clump.

This is a versatile dessert. You can make the meringue ahead of time and store it in a tightly sealed container. You can also substitute peaches for the pears, or add a small handful of seasonal berries to the plate. Hazelnuts — almost any nut, in fact — can be used instead of almonds. At the restaurant, we sometimes use poached peaches or apricots when the stone-fruit season arrives, and instead of using the poaching liquid in the sabayon, we substitute muscat Beaumes-de-Venise, a fragrant, opulent wine from the south of France.

DACQUOISE WITH POACHED PEARS AND SABAYON

Time: 2 hours

- 2 cups whole almonds
- 1 3/4 cups sugar
- 8 large eggs
- 4 cups white wine
- 1/4 cup almond paste
- 1 vanilla bean, sliced in half lengthwise, seeds removed
- 1 orange, peeled and cut into four round slices
- Juice of one lemon
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 2 pieces star anise
- 5 cloves
- 2 tablespoons grenadine (optional)
- 3 Bartlett pears
- 1 cup heavy cream, whipped until stiff.

1. To make the dacquoise disks: Preheat oven to 250 degrees. Line a half-sheet (13-by-17-inch) baking pan with parchment paper.

2. Using a food processor, chop the almonds with 1/2 cup of the sugar until finely ground. Crack the eggs, placing 8 whites in the bowl of an electric mixer and 5 yolks in a small covered container. Refrigerate the yolks until needed. Whip the whites until soft peaks form; then, gradually add 3/2 cup sugar. Continue to whip until whites are barely stiff. Fold in the almond mixture. Pour into baking pan, and bake until the meringue is dry on the surface but still slightly springy to the touch, about 1 hour and 20 minutes. When the meringue is baked, turn onto sheets of foil or waxed paper and remove parchment paper. Using a cookie cutter or glass, cut into 12 4-inch rounds.

3. While meringue is baking, prepare the

poached pears: In a wide nonreactive saucepan (6 quarts or larger), combine the wine and almond paste. With a wooden spoon, break the paste into pieces. Add 1/2 cup of the sugar, the vanilla bean, orange slices, lemon juice, cinnamon stick, star anise, cloves and grenadine. Peel the pears, cut in half and remove cores with a melon-baller. Place cut side down in the saucepan, and place a clean cotton napkin over them in the pan liquid, to keep them submerged. Place pan over medium heat, and bring to a simmer. Reduce heat to low, and simmer until the pears are cooked through, about 25 minutes. Remove the cloth, and place the pears in a bowl until needed. Strain the poaching liquid, retaining 1/2 cup for the sabayon.

4. To make the sabayon: Reheat the poaching liquid if it has cooled. In a metal bowl briefly beat the egg yolks and remaining 1/4 cup of sugar. Fit the bowl over a saucepan with about an inch of boiling water. Continue to beat the egg mixture by hand until it thickens. Transfer to an electric mixer, and beat at medium speed while adding the 1/2 cup of poaching liquid in a thin stream. Beat until mixture has cooled, about 5 to 7 minutes. Fold in the whipped cream.

5. To assemble: Place a dacquoise disk on each of six serving plates. Place a small amount of sabayon on each disk, top with a pear half and add more sabayon. Lean a second disk against the pear. Serve immediately.

Yield: 6 servings.