

WOW, What a Cake!

The Cake Raffle is a highlight of the Inverness Fair, bringing out the community's best bakers, and most devoted cake lovers. Last year's entrants were fabulous, to look at and to eat.



Here's a recipe for Devil's Food Cake with Salted Caramel icing, adapted from Inverness native Claire Ptak's Violet Bakery Cookbook and beautifully presented by her proud mother, Elizabeth Ptak.

Chocolate Devil's Food Cake

This keeps really well for a couple of days, so it is great for celebrations, as you can get the cake made early. Bake the night before you want to fill it, as this gives the crumb a chance to settle. Similarly, it's best to fill the cake and then chill it for a couple of hours before icing the top and sides. It's much easier to ice a cold cake than a warm, crumbly one. However, a warm fluffy cake with caramel icing melting into it is dreamy, so if that's what you're after, make cupcakes instead. Makes one 20-cm (8-inch) cake or 24 cupcakes, serving 12.

Cake Ingredients

220g (1 1/2 cups plus 1 tablespoon) all-purpose flour
100g (1 cup) cocoa powder
1 teaspoon kosher salt
2 teaspoons baking soda
1 teaspoon baking powder
450g (2 1/4 cups) sugar
2 eggs
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
200g (3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons) buttermilk or plain yogurt
100g (7 tablespoons) vegetable oil
225g (1 cup) hot water

Preheat the oven to 160°C/320°F (140°C/285°F convection). Butter and line a 20-cm (8-inch) cake pan with paper, or line two 12-cup muffin tins with paper liners.

Measure the dry ingredients, including the sugar, into a large mixing bowl and whisk with a balloon whisk to distribute the salt, baking soda, and baking powder evenly throughout the other dry ingredients.

In another bowl, whisk together the wet ingredients (except for the hot water). Once they are well whisked together, slowly whisk in the hot water.

Make a well in the center of the dry ingredients and pour in half of the wet mixture. Starting in the middle of the bowl, whisk in a clockwise, circular motion. Don't switch direction or you'll end up with lumps. Gradually add the remaining wet ingredients until you have a smooth, liquid batter.

If you are making a large cake, pour the batter into your pan right away and bake for 40 to 50 minutes until the top is springy to the touch and an inserted skewer comes out clean. If you are making cupcakes, scrape the batter into a container that will fit into your fridge and place a lid on top. Chill the batter for at least 1 hour. This will thicken it and make it easier to spoon into your cupcake liners.

Bake the cupcakes for 18 to 20 minutes, until the tops are springy to the touch and an inserted skewer comes out clean.

Decorate the tops and sides of your cooled cake or cupcakes with Salted Caramel Icing. Recipe follows.

Salted Caramel Sauce

This recipe is a little challenging at first, but once you trust yourself and are willing to take the caramel to the brink with confidence, you will have a killer trick up your sleeve. At Violet, we use this sauce in our Salted Caramel Icing, but it's also delicious drizzled over ice cream or warmed and poured over chocolate cake. *Mise en place* is really important here so that you are set to go as soon as the caramel is ready. Makes about 500g (2 cups)

Sauce Ingredients:

150g (2/3 cup) heavy cream
1/2 vanilla pod
4 tablespoons water
250g (1 1/4 cups) sugar
2 tablespoons golden syrup
1 teaspoon lemon juice
1/4 teaspoon fleur de sel
65g (4 1/2 tablespoons) unsalted butter, cut into small pieces

Measure the cream into a large, heavy-bottomed pan. Split the vanilla pod and scrape out the seeds. Add the pod and seeds to the cream.

Put the water, sugar, and golden syrup into another large, heavy-bottomed pan. Have the other ingredients measured out and ready to go.

Begin by heating the cream and vanilla. Keep an eye on it as it can bubble over quite easily. Meanwhile, start heating the water, sugar, and golden syrup—don't stir it, but you can swirl the pan if necessary—all the while keeping an eye on the vanilla cream.

As soon as the cream starts to bubble rapidly, turn the heat off.

Once the sugar mixture starts to color, give it a few swirls. You want the sugar to turn golden brown and then almost black. When you see a wisp of smoke starting to rise out of the pan, you know it's done. Take the sugar off the heat and immediately whisk in the vanilla cream. Don't worry about the vanilla pod at this point as it will continue to infuse flavor. Stir in the lemon juice, salt, and butter, mixing until smooth. Allow the caramel to cool completely, then remove the vanilla pod, transfer the caramel to a plastic tub (with a tight-fitting lid), and put in the fridge to chill. Once the caramel is chilled, it can be used in the Salted Caramel Icing. Caramel keeps well for up to 2 weeks in the fridge and 3 months in the freezer.

Salted Caramel Icing

75g (1/4 cup) Salted Caramel Sauce
125g (1/2 cup) unsalted butter, softened
1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon whole milk
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
550 to 750g (3 1/4 to 5 1/3 cups) confectioners' sugar, sifted

In the bowl of a stand mixer, beat together the salted caramel sauce and butter until smooth. Add all of the milk along with the vanilla, salt, and 250g (1 1/4 cups) of the confectioners' sugar. Cream together on a low speed for at least 3 minutes (set your timer). Gradually add more confectioners' sugar as needed, until you get the consistency you want, to make a spreadable and creamy icing that is as light as can be.

