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The Magic of Tiramisu

Luscious, creamy, full of coffee and chocolate flavors—perfect for dessert. By Susan Van Allen

Tiramisu—that literally means Pick-Me-Up—has become the world's most famous Italian dessert. As far as Italian food goes, it's a new dish that didn't appear in cookbooks until the early 1980s. Experts agree that Tiramisu originated a decade earlier, in the Veneto region, in the city of Treviso. But there is a dispute over who was the first to create it. One pastry chef, Carminantonio Iannaccone, proclaims he spent two years developing it for his Piedigrotta restaurant, using the everyday flavors of his region.

I prefer another story, told by Alba Campeol, who, with her husband, owned a restaurant in Treviso called Le Beccherie. Alba says that after she gave birth to her son, she felt very weak. To give her energy, her mother-in-law mixed up zabaglione, mascarpone, and a bit of coffee. Alba liked it so much, she told Loly Linguanotto, the pastry chef of her restaurant, about it, and Loly had the idea of adding the lady fingers and cocoa. Recalling her mother-in-law, Alba named it Tiramisu. It's rare in Italy, or in almost any culture, to hear a mother-in-law/daughter-in-law story with a happy ending, which is why I love this version.

Last January I spent a sweet time focusing on this culinary treat with chefs, journalists, and restaurateurs at the International Culinary Center in New York, where we gathered to celebrate the

International Day of Italian Cuisine. Tiramisu was the honoree of this year's event. All around the globe, members of the Virtual Group of Italian Chefs (itcheFs-GVCI) were mixing up eggs, sugar, mascarpone, and lady fingers soaked in espresso to follow a traditional recipe. Through the magic of video, our New York gang connected with the Aldus Cooking School in Milan. It was evening in Italy, and on the screen appeared a class full of enthusiastic students in white caps, seriously standing by as chefs demonstrated the proper way to prepare classic Tiramisu.

This worldwide Tiramisu making was fueled by passionate chefs dedicated to preserving Italy's recipes and fighting against "the fakers," who they accuse of corrupting Italian food with their use of inferior ingredients and so-called innovations.

"When the name of an Italian traditional dish is used, it should be prepared in the traditional manner," said Rosario Scarpato, the creator of the itcheFsGVCI. "Tiramisu is simple to prepare. But if you use incorrect ingredients and too much creativity in its preparation, you'll find yourself with a Frankenstein dessert that has nothing to do with the original," he added.

Joining us in New York was Tony May, the legendary New York restaurateur (of San Domenico and now SD26). May is well known for being a fundamentalist when it comes to authentic Italian cuisine,

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elevating America's perception of it from the days when he first arrived from Italy.

He remembers working at Manhattan's Colony in 1963 and being repelled by the heavy, sauce-smothered "Eye-talian" food that was being served in restaurants. Chicken parmigian and Fettucine Alfredo were dishes he had never seen in Italy.

His work over the past 50 years in his restaurants and as a speaker and author has helped Americans to discover the pleasures of genuine Italian food and to appreciate that the basis of it is quality ingredients. "The better the product, the better the result," May said.

Master pastry chef Giancarlo Perbellini, a culinary star from Verona, took over at the counter to demonstrate "The Way of Tiramisu." "Don't forget, this must be made at least a couple of hours in advance," he reminded us. Following the classic recipe, Perbellini moved on to a few variations, which had been approved by Scarpato. The first was the most basic, a second used slightly cooked egg yolks (as required in restaurants for health reasons) and whipped cream, and a third introduced Marsala. Many of us were surprised that Marsala wasn't included in the original recipe, but Scarpato confirmed that the classic version, made by home cooks, contains no liquor. "Though, of course, its origins were also inspired by Zuppa Inglese, the liquor-soaked dessert that Italians adapted from the English trifle centuries ago," he said.

Tiramisu is the perfect light pick-me-up after any meal. As long as you keep the quality of each ingredient high, go ahead and follow your mood, choosing from a variety of Tiramisu recipes to end your meal deliciously.

Tiramisu

- 4** egg yolks
- 3/4** cup sugar
- 1** cup mascarpone cheese
- 1 1/2** cups whipping cream
- 2** cups strong coffee, cooled
- 1/2** cup Kahlua
- 30** to **36** ladyfingers
- Cocoa powder for dusting**

In a double boiler, combine the egg yolks and sugar and beat until mixture is light yellow and has reached 140°F for 5 to 6 minutes. (If you do not wish to cook the mixture, simply combine egg yolks and sugar in a bowl and beat until mixture turns light yellow.)

Remove mixture from heat and pour into a large bowl. Mix in the mascarpone and let cool for 8 to 10 minutes.

In a separate bowl, whip the cream until stiff peaks form. Gently fold whipped cream into egg mixture; set aside.

Combine the Kahlua and coffee and dip the ladyfingers. Don't oversoak to the point of sogginess.

In a 12- to 14-inch round or oval dish, spread a thin layer of cream mixture. Arrange the ladyfingers in a layer of cream, breaking pieces to make a uniform fit. Add another layer of cream, then another layer of ladyfingers. Top with remaining cream and smooth with back side of butter knife. Cover with plastic wrap and chill for 4 to 6 hours. Before serving, dust generously with cocoa powder.

Makes 8 to 10 servings.

Tiramisu with Chocolate Cake

Cream:

- 3** cups mascarpone
- 1/2** cup sugar
- 2** tablespoons vanilla extract
- 3** tablespoons rum
- 1** cup whipping cream

Espresso Syrup:

- 1** cup coffee-flavored liqueur (like Kahlua)
- 1/2** cup sugar

Cake:

- 3** (11-oz. each) pound or loaf cakes, **2** chocolate and **1** plain, cut into **1/4**-inch slices
- Unsweetened cocoa powder as needed for sprinkling over the top**

In a medium bowl, combine mascarpone, sugar, vanilla, rum and whipping cream and beat until smooth.

In a small saucepan, combine coffee-flavored liqueur and sugar and bring to a boil. Remove from heat and let cool.

Arrange half of the chocolate cake slices on the bottom of a 9 x 9-inch pan or glass baking dish. Drizzle one-third of the syrup over the layer, then spread one-third of

the cream. Add second layer of chocolate cake. Drizzle with syrup, then top with remaining cream. Cover and refrigerate for several hours or overnight. When ready to serve, dust with cocoa powder.

Makes 12 servings.

Calabrian Tiramisu

- 4** ounces semisweet chocolate
- 3** large egg yolks
- 1/4** cup sugar plus **1** tablespoon
- 3/4** cup sweet Marsala wine, divided
- 1** cup mascarpone, softened
- 1** cup heavy cream
- 1/4** cup espresso, cooled to room temperature
- 30** ladyfingers
- Unsweetened cocoa powder as needed for sprinkling over the top**

Place the chocolate in a bowl set over a pot of simmering water (or use a double boiler) and stir until melted. Remove from the heat and cool to room temperature.

In a bowl set over a pot of simmering water, beat the egg yolks and 1/4 cup sugar until pale yellow and frothy.

Add 1/2 cup of sweet Marsala and continue whisking until mixture is thick and double in volume. Remove from the heat and fold in the melted chocolate and mascarpone until both are well incorporated. Whip the heavy cream until soft peaks form. Add the remaining 1 tablespoon sugar and beat until soft peaks form. Fold the whipped cream into the mascarpone mixture.

Combine the remaining Marsala wine with the espresso. One at a time, quickly dip the ladyfingers into this mixture and arrange them in a single layer in a 9-inch baking dish. Spread half the mascarpone cheese evenly over the ladyfingers. Repeat with a second layer of dipped ladyfingers and remaining mascarpone. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 2 to 3 hours. To serve, lightly sprinkle the cocoa powder evenly over the top.

Makes 6 servings.

-Recipe adapted from Calabria's Caffe Mauro