



Light Fruit Soufflé

Italian meringue makes luscious, low-fat soufflés that are delicate yet stable enough to assemble ahead

BY LAURANN CLARIDGE

There's something impressive about a soufflé—puffed and cloud-like, with just a hint of a wobble. But preparing a classic dessert soufflé can mean missing the entire main course in order to whisk up egg whites and then wait with all fingers crossed while the soufflé bakes.

Years ago, I stumbled across the technique of replacing the temperamental egg whites in a soufflé with the more stable, but equally airy, Italian meringue. The result: a high-rising soufflé that can be made ahead and baked at the last minute.

VIVID FRUIT FILLING BALANCES SWEET, AIRY MERINGUE

These soufflés have two parts: the meringue and a “surprise” center. The meringue provides the billowy volume and airy texture typical of a soufflé, while the fruit center delivers intense, concentrated flavor. The two elements are made separately and then layered in individual soufflé molds before baking to provide a delightful balance of texture and flavor.

Pretty, delicious. These meringue-based soufflés are less temperamental than classic soufflés, but equally light and airy.

You Can Make Ahead

Use fruit purée, curd, or sweetened berries as the fruit center; I've even had great success with store-bought fruit preserves. Purées, curds, and other smooth-textured fillings give you a creamy, moist center, while individual berries provide more of a bright, fresh burst of flavor scattered throughout the soufflé. Either way, it's best to begin by preparing the fruit center and then setting it aside while you focus on the Italian meringue. With the exception of fresh berries, the filling should be spoonable, like jam, but not runny. Anything too thick won't mingle with the meringue, and anything too liquid will sink to the bottom.

Flavor the meringue to match the fruit. Adding fruit juice, liqueur, or zest to the sugar syrup in the standard Italian meringue recipe (see the sidebar below) gives it a backdrop of flavor to complement the fruit center. It also transforms the meringue from marshmallow white to lovely pastel shades that echo the flavors within. In the apricot-orange soufflé, for

example, apricot-flavored orange juice gives the meringue a sweet nectar flavor and a pale orange color.

WHEN WHIPPING AN ITALIAN MERINGUE, TIMING IS KEY

Despite its name, Italian meringue is a staple in French dessert making. This type of meringue is fluffy, very glossy, and quite stable. The basic process is straightforward: whisk egg whites until stiff peaks form and then pour sugar syrup cooked to 248°F (hard-ball stage on a candy thermometer) onto the whites as you continue to whisk. The hot syrup sets the meringue, which is what makes it so sturdy and airy.

The tricky part is having the whites and sugar ready at the same moment. If the syrup is ready too soon, it may turn to caramel and be lost, while overbeating the whites makes them lumpy and dry. I recommend using a standing mixer for the whites to give you more time to monitor the cooking syrup and to leave your hands free when you beat in the hot syrup.

The sugar syrup takes the longest, so start with that. Sugar syrup is traditionally made in a well-cleaned, unlined copper pan, but a heavy-based stainless-steel pan works just as well. Most recipes use a ratio of two parts sugar to one part water. Too little water may encourage crystallization, while too much water simply means a longer cooking time. As the syrup boils, water evaporates, and the syrup becomes more concentrated. For my soufflés, I jazz up the meringue by substituting lemon juice, apricot cooking liquid, and even fresh berries for some or all of the water to add flavor and color to the meringue.

Sugar can crystallize easily as it cooks, but a bit of acid, such as cream of tartar, vinegar, or lemon juice, should prevent this. If you notice crystals forming on the side of the pan as the syrup cooks, wipe them down with a clean, wet pastry brush, or cover the pan briefly with a tight-fitting lid to create steam that will wash the crystals down the sides of the pan.

Careful timing leads to firm yet fluffy Italian meringue



The syrup needs a head start, so begin cooking it before beating the egg whites. When the temperature hits 220°F, start your mixer. (This syrup is flavored with raspberry.)



When the egg whites form soft peaks, add the confectioners' sugar and keep beating until shiny peaks form. Don't worry if the syrup isn't quite hot enough: the whites will wait for a few minutes.



When the syrup reaches 248° (or 240° for the raspberry syrup), pour it in a steady stream over the whites, aiming just to the side of the whip.



Keep beating until the bowl is cool to the touch.

Once the syrup reaches 220°F, begin beating the whites at medium speed. The syrup still has another 5 to 10 minutes to go at this stage, which is about the time needed to beat the egg whites. Gradually increase the mixer speed as the whites stiffen.

A pinch of cream of tartar added to the whites at the beginning makes a silkier, sturdier meringue, and a bit of confectioners' sugar added toward the end of beating sweetens and further stabilizes the meringue. Once the whites are voluminous and stiff, turn off the mixer and monitor the sugar syrup closely. The temperature will climb quickly and you need to be ready when it hits 248°. If the sugar syrup cooks faster than the egg whites, carefully add a little bit of water to the syrup to bring its temperature down. If, on the other hand, the peaks of the egg whites are in danger of becoming too stiff, turn off the mixer until the sugar syrup is ready. They can easily sit for 5 to 10 minutes while you wait for the syrup.

When the temperature of the sugar syrup reaches 248°F (or 240° for the berry syrup), gradually pour it in a steady stream onto the egg whites with the mixer running. Aim the syrup between the whip and the bowl so the moving beater doesn't splash the hot syrup to the sides of the bowl where it will harden and not mix.

You can hold these soufflés unbaked for three days in the fridge or a week in the freezer.

Continue to beat the meringue until the bottom of the bowl feels cool to the touch, about 10 minutes.

ASSEMBLE THE LAYERS OF FLAVOR
Once you've prepared the fruit center and

the meringue, it's time to put the soufflés together. Individual ramekins or straight-sided coffee cups make the most elegant (and easy) presentation. Brushing the insides with melted butter prevents the soufflé from sticking, but can cause problems as the soufflés rise—they'll slip and slide on the buttered ramekins. Give them something to cling to by dusting the buttered surface with confectioners' sugar and gently tapping out the excess.

Each soufflé gets three layers of meringue that sandwich two spoonfuls of filling. Use a pastry bag or a spatula to get the meringue into the mold and a tablespoon for the filling. The meringue goes in first, about halfway to the top of each ramekin, followed by a tablespoon of filling, another layer of meringue, a second spoonful of filling, and finally a smooth top layer of meringue. With smooth-textured fillings, like preserves or curd, I lightly swirl the meringue and filling together at each layer for a more homogenous texture. The Italian meringue is much less delicate than a classic soufflé, so don't worry about deflating it as you work.

These soufflés can wait. Unlike traditional soufflés, which must be baked immediately, these soufflés can be refrigerated (or even frozen) and then baked when you're ready to serve them. Soufflés refrigerated for a few hours may be left uncovered, but for longer periods, cover them loosely with plastic wrap. For freezing, wrap a layer of foil around the plastic. These soufflés hold for up to three days in the refrigerator or for up to one week in the freezer. To defrost a frozen soufflé, simply leave it at room temperature for half an hour before baking.

SERVE SOUFFLES RIGHT FROM THE OVEN

Soufflés taste best when still a bit moist and creamy inside. Overcooking makes the insides overly dry and, since the whites are already partially cooked by the sugar syrup, there's no reason to fear that the eggs are undercooked. Once the soufflés are lightly browned and nicely risen—they tend to inflate a bit less than a classic soufflé—serve them immediately on small dessert plates. A sprinkle of confectioners' sugar dresses them up nicely, but sometimes I also offer a little ice cream, *crème anglaise*, or fruit purée on the side.



A surprise inside. Fresh berries, lemon curd, or apricot purée adds contrasting texture and flavor.



Piping the Italian meringue is easy and neat, but you could use a spoon to fill the ramekins, too. Smooth the tops of the soufflés with a butter knife or an offset spatula.



Puffed and browned, these soufflés just want a dusting of sugar for decoration.

Excellent (berry)

Master Recipe for Fruit Soufflés

Begin by making one fruit filling and the matching sugar syrup, and then continue with the meringue and the soufflé assembly. Yields eight individual soufflés.

Sugar syrup from one of the following recipes

6 egg whites (about ¾ cup)

⅛ tsp. cream of tartar

¼ cup confectioners' sugar; more for the ramekins and for sprinkling

For the berry soufflé only: 2 Tbs. Chambord or other berry liqueur

Fruit filling from one of the following recipes

Butter eight individual ramekins or straight-sided coffee cups; dust the buttered surface with confectioners' sugar and gently tap out the excess. Heat the oven to 400°F and set the rack in the lower third of the oven.

Make the Italian meringue—Cook the sugar syrup until it reaches 220° on a candy thermometer. Start beating the egg whites and cream of tartar in a standing mixer on medium speed. Gradually increase the speed to the highest setting. When the whites form soft peaks, add ¼ cup confectioners' sugar in a slow, steady sprinkle. Beat until the whites form stiff, shiny peaks. If this happens before the sugar syrup reaches 248° (240° for the berry syrup), turn off the mixer.

Remove the sugar syrup from the heat as soon as it reaches 248°F (240° for the berry syrup). Turn the mixer back on to the highest speed if you have turned it off. Pour the hot syrup between the bowl and the beaters in a slow, steady stream. (For the berry soufflé, add the liqueur). Continue beating until the mixing bowl feels cool, about 1½ min.

Assemble and bake the soufflés—Using a pastry bag or a spoon, fill the ramekins halfway with the meringue, spreading it evenly. Add about 1 Tbs. filling to each

ramekin. Lightly swirl the filling into the meringue with a knife. Fill the ramekins with more meringue to just below the rim and add the remaining filling. Divide the remaining meringue among the ramekins and, using a butter knife or small offset spatula, smooth the top of each soufflé. At this point, the soufflés can be refrigerated for up to three days or frozen for up to a week.

Set the soufflés on a baking sheet and bake until the tops are light brown, 8 to 10 min. Remove them carefully from the oven and sprinkle with confectioners' sugar if you like.

Fruit Fillings

LEMON CURD

6 egg yolks

¾ cup sugar

½ cup fresh lemon juice

1½ tsp. finely grated lemon zest

1 Tbs. unsalted butter

In a small double-boiler insert or a stainless-steel bowl over simmering water, combine the egg yolks, sugar, lemon juice, and zest. Stir the mixture over the simmering water until it becomes thick and creamy—the consistency of mayonnaise—3 to 5 min. Remove the bowl from the double boiler, whisk in the butter and stir until incorporated. Covered tightly and refrigerated, the lemon curd will keep for three days.

BERRY FILLING

6 oz. (1½ cups) fresh or thawed frozen

raspberries or blackberries or ¾ cup berry preserves

If using berries: 2 Tbs. sugar, or to taste

If using berries, toss them with sugar and let them sit while you make the meringue.

APRICOT-ORANGE PUREE

1 cup packed dried apricots

1½ cups orange juice

1 tsp. grated fresh ginger

1½ tsp. grated lemon zest

In a small saucepan over medium heat, mix the apricots, orange juice, ginger, and zest;

simmer until the apricots are tender 20 min. Remove from the heat and add the apricots in the juice to cool, at 15 min.

Strain the apricots, pressing hard to squeeze out as much liquid as possible. You should have about ¾ cup of apricot cooking liquid. If necessary, add more water to make ¾ cup and set aside to use in the meringue. Purée the strained apricots until smooth.

Flavored Sugar Syrups

LEMON SUGAR SYRUP

1¼ cups sugar

¾ cup fresh lemon juice

Combine the sugar and lemon juice in a small heavy-based stainless-steel saucepan; bring to a boil. Begin the procedure for the meringue when the syrup reaches 220° on a candy thermometer.

BERRY SUGAR SYRUP

1 lb. fresh or thawed unsweetened frozen

raspberries or blackberries

1 cup sugar

½ cup water

1 tsp. fresh lemon juice

→ use 1.5x to make 1.5 cups

Choose a heavy-based stainless-steel saucepan that's large enough to accommodate the berry mixture, which tends to bubble up as it cooks. Combine the berries, sugar, water, and lemon juice in the pan; bring to a boil. Cook at a rapid boil, stirring occasionally until the berries have disintegrated and rendered all their juices, about 10 min. Remove the pan from the heat and immediately pour the mixture through a fine sieve suspended over a clean, heat-safe mixing bowl. Using a large spoon or the bottom of a small ladle, gently press the berry pulp in the strainer to get all the juices but none of the seeds. You should have about 1½ cups. Return the strained syrup to a clean saucepan set over medium-high heat. It will be quite thick and bubbly as it boils. Begin the procedure for the meringue when the syrup reaches 220° on a candy thermometer. Watch carefully to be sure it doesn't scorch and note that it should only cook to 240°.

APRICOT-ORANGE SUGAR SYRUP

¾ cup apricot cooking liquid from apricot filling recipe (if there isn't enough liquid, add water to equal ¾ cup)

¾ cup sugar

Combine the apricot cooking liquid and sugar in a small heavy-based stainless-steel saucepan; bring to a boil. Begin the procedure for the meringue when the syrup reaches 220° on a candy thermometer.



Keep the soufflé center moist and creamy by avoiding overcooking.

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