

Making Classic Profiteroles with a Blackberry Twist

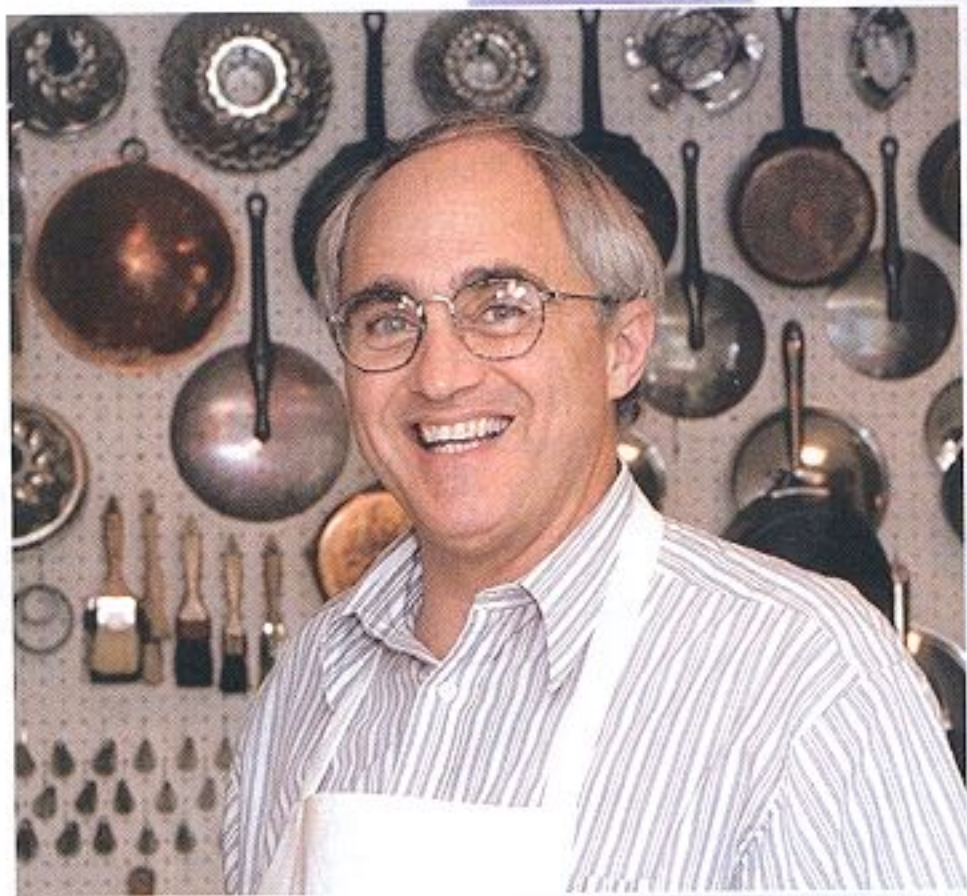
Drying the batter before adding eggs makes crisper puffs, and a chocolate lining adds a sweet surprise

BY BRUCE HEALY

I first encountered chocolate profiteroles as a graduate student in New York around 1970. I was just starting to get interested in French food—notably desserts—and these small cream puffs filled with vanilla ice cream and smothered in chocolate sauce were as ubiquitous on French restaurant menus back then as *mousse au chocolat*. While dessert trends have since changed, the idea of crisp, delicate pastry shells filled with smooth, cold ice cream still has an irresistible appeal, and I recently decided to revitalize this classic dessert with a pair of modern twists.

First, the sauce: A sauce made from puréed blackberries works perfectly here because, like the original chocolate sauce, it gives you a deep, rich color to contrast with the ice cream, and it offers the vivid, luscious taste of fruit. While blackberries were once one of the ephemeral treats of summer, fresh blackberries now come to market most of the year, and excellent frozen blackberries are always available.

Second, the profiteroles (pronounced proh-FEET-ch-rolls) themselves: I realized that by glazing the interior with chocolate, I could protect them from the melting ice cream that in the original version had a tendency to make the pastry soggy. This simple trick allowed me to keep some chocolate flavor in the dessert, but to reduce its role to a more subtle accent. As a bonus, the chocolate gets hard from



Author Bruce Healy keeps his baking tools organized on a pegboard wall

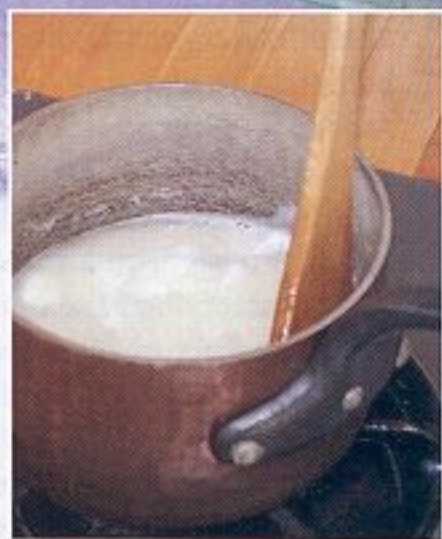
contact with the ice cream and provides a pleasing little crunch to each bite.

FOR PERFECT PUFFS, MEASURE PRECISELY

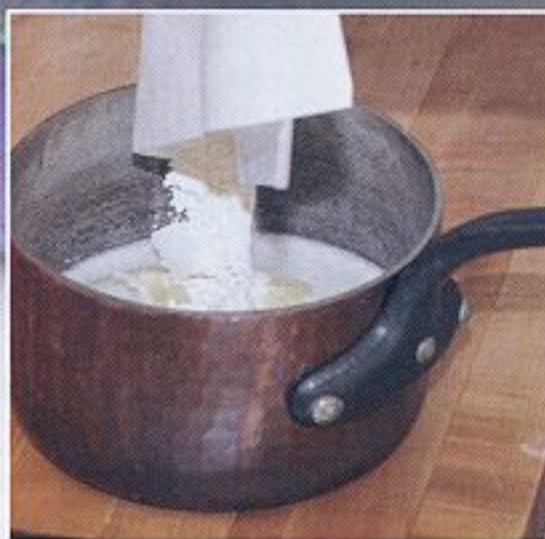
The key element in making this dessert is, of course, the little cream puff—without it, we would have merely a delicious blackberry sundae. Profiteroles, like all other pastries in the cream-puff and *éclair* family, are made from a batter called *pâte à choux*



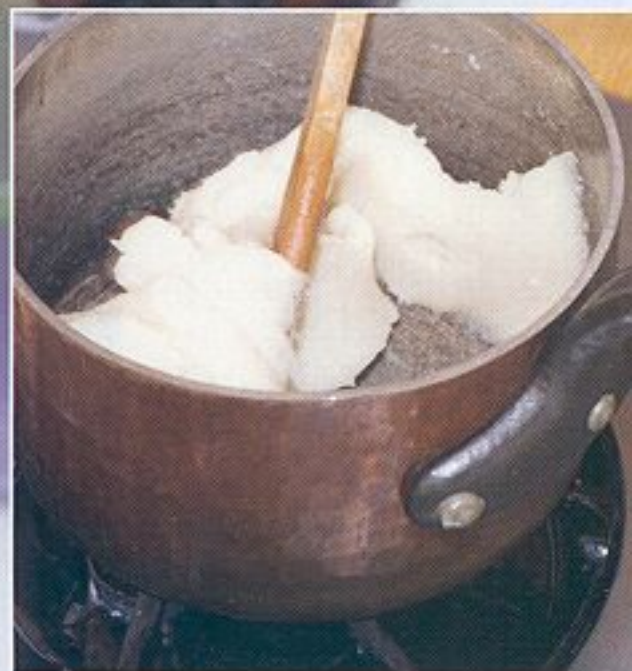
Mix the basic dough and beat over heat for better puffs



Combine the water, butter, sugar, and salt in a 1-quart saucepan and bring it to a boil over high heat, stirring occasionally to melt the butter.



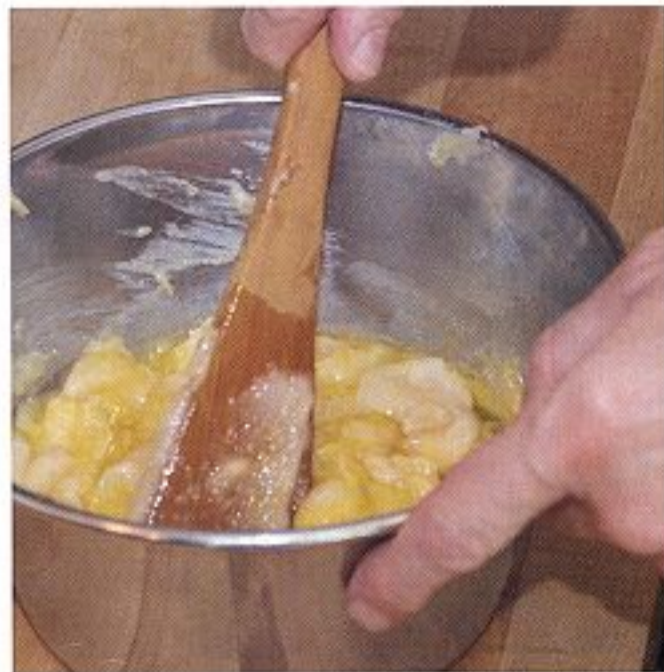
Off the heat, add the sifted flour all at once; stir with a wooden spatula until the ingredients form a mass in the pan's center—this is the panade.



Return the panade to medium-high heat and beat constantly for about 30 seconds. It should feel dry but slightly buttery, with a matte surface.

Add just enough egg to make a soft and glossy batter

Transfer the *panade* to a bowl to stop the cooking. Mix in two eggs all at once, stirring with a wooden spatula. Start slowly and then gradually beat more vigorously as the eggs mix with the *panade*.



When the batter is smooth, stir in the beaten third egg a little at a time until the batter is soft and glossy and begins to flow slowly off the spatula when lifted.



The batter has the right consistency when it sticks to your finger, pulling up in a string from the rest of the batter. Don't add any more egg at this point.

Pipe the batter into evenly

Mark the baking sheets with $1\frac{1}{4}$ -inch circles, evenly spaced at least 1 inch apart. To do this, dip a cookie cutter or an inverted pastry tube in flour and tap it on the baking sheet.



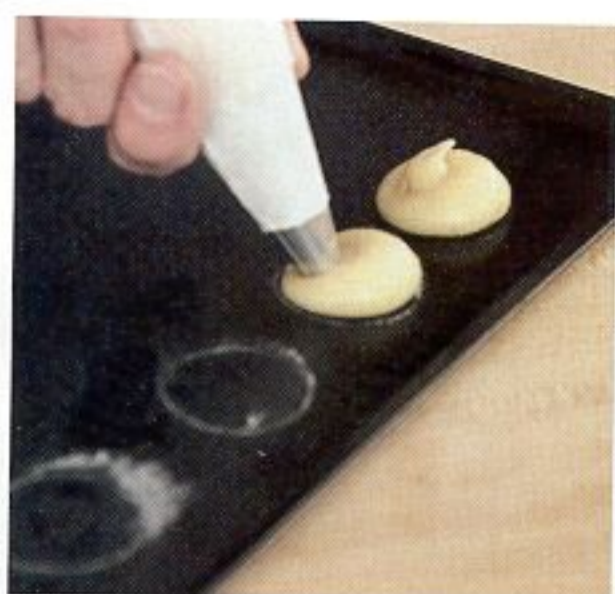
(pronounced *paht ah SHOO*). The magic of *pâte à choux* is that a lump of heavy batter bakes to a light, crisp, hollow shell—totally different from the flaky texture of a buttery pastry dough. Of course, like all magic, this trick is really accomplished by a systematic sleight of hand.

The *choux* batter is actually just a paste of flour, water, and butter moistened with eggs. The paste, called a *panade*, is begun by heating water and butter, along with a little salt and sugar, until the butter melts. One of the wonders of *pâte à choux* is how such a small quantity of ingredients ($\frac{1}{2}$ cup water, $3\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons butter, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup flour) bakes up to make enough for eight desserts, but working with small quantities means being extra careful with timing and technique. To avoid problems, I cut the butter into small pieces before adding it to the water and stir occasionally as it heats so that it melts as soon as the water reaches a boil; otherwise, too much water might evaporate, thereby altering the proportions of the *panade*.

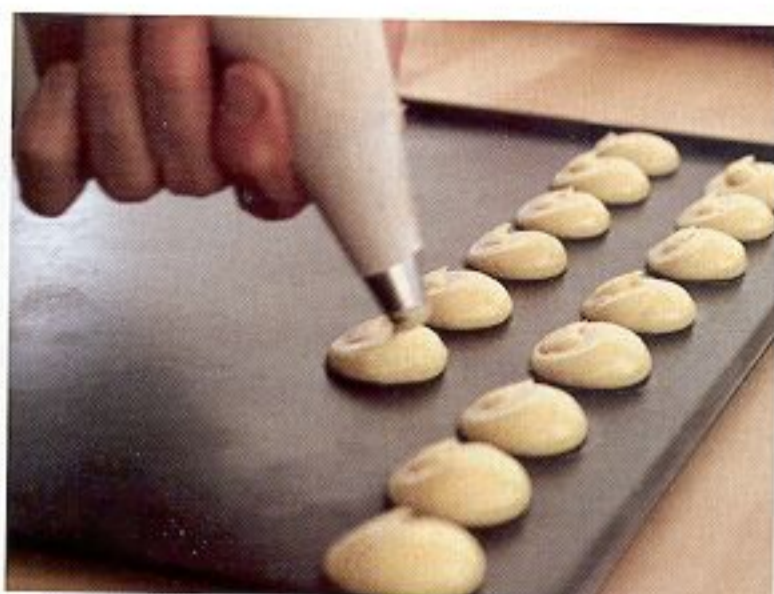
Next I add the flour all at once, off the heat, beating vigorously with a wooden spatula. The warmth of the water causes the starch in the flour to swell instantly and absorb all the water. This traps the water inside the dough so that it can later turn to steam and cause the profiteroles to puff up when they're baked. Vigorous beating creates an elastic dough, strong enough to hold the puffed shape when baked.

The drier the *panade*, the more egg it will absorb, and the lighter the profiteroles will be. I return the *panade* to the burner and stir vigorously for about 30 seconds until it feels slightly drier and has

shaped domes for high rising puffs



Scoop the batter into a pastry bag fitted with a $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch plain pastry tube (Ateco 5). Hold the bag at a 60-degree angle from the baking sheet and set the tip of the pastry tube on the sheet. Press on the pastry bag until the batter begins to spread around the tip of the tube. Then slowly raise the tip of the tube straight up, continuing to press evenly on the bag, until the batter has spread around the tip.



Release the pressure on the pastry bag and finish the dome with a quick semicircular flick of the pastry tube. The tube's tip should move across the surface of the batter, severing the connection between the batter on the baking sheet and the batter in the tube.



Dip a pastry brush in the remaining beaten egg (add more egg if you need it) and gently pat the top of each dome with this egg wash to moisten its surface lightly. Don't let the egg wash drip onto the baking sheet or it will make the pastries stick.

a matte (rather than shiny) surface. Cooking it too long will make the butter separate from the *panade*.

I add the eggs in two parts to get the batter just right. With so many variables—the amount of water evaporated, how much the *panade* dried, and the size of the eggs—it's impossible to say exactly how much egg to add. For this reason, I begin by adding two of the three eggs at once, lightly beating the third and setting it aside. At first, the batter doesn't seem to want to absorb the egg. I stir slowly with a wooden spatula, and the batter gradually becomes smooth; I then begin to beat more vigorously.

Now comes the critical step of adding just enough of the third beaten egg to make the batter soft and glossy. Some batters take only a few drops of the last egg, while others need all of it. As I stir in the third egg, I use two tests to decide when I've added enough. First, I lift the spatula as I stir to see if the batter flows off slowly. When it does, I know I'm getting close. Next, I touch the batter's surface with a fingertip. I know that I have enough egg when the batter sticks to my finger and comes away in a string. Add only as much egg as it takes to reach this consistency: too much will make the batter runny and it won't puff as well. (Save any leftover egg to brush on the piped batter.) Don't overwork the batter at this point or it will rise unevenly.

PIPE THE BATTER FOR GREAT SHAPE

Choux batter is easiest to pipe out on a baking sheet with a light film of butter. If there's too much grease,

the batter will slide around on the sheet as you try to pipe it. Too little and the puffs may stick after baking. Seasoned black steel baking sheets (the best) or nonstick baking sheets don't need any greasing. For all others, I use a paper towel to coat the surface very lightly with melted butter. Avoid air-cushioned baking sheets altogether. When baking profiteroles, you want the heat from the bottom, and the air pocket in this type of baking sheet diffuses that heat. For the same reason, choux should not be baked in a convection oven because there's no bottom heat.

Pipe profiteroles in small domes. The key to a shapely puff is handling the pastry bag carefully. I set

Bake until the puffs are crisp and dry—be sure to test



Heat the oven to 400°F. Bake the puffs, using a wooden spoon to hold the oven door ajar about 1½ inches, until the batter puffs up and turns a medium golden brown and the profiteroles are firm, dry, and crisp, 35 to 45 minutes.



Open one up to test it. If the inside is still soft, the puffs need more baking. If the bottoms of the puffs look like they're browning too much, reduce the oven temperature to 350°F.

the tip directly on the baking sheet and press on the bag until the batter spreads around the tip. I gradually raise the tip until I reach the size I want. While I'm piping these little puffs, I imagine myself inflating them as I go with my pastry tip inserted in the middle of each little dome.

Bake only one sheet at a time. Pipe out only as much as you can bake at one time (one baking sheet if you only have one oven) and lightly brush the tops of the domes with beaten egg. Don't let the egg drip onto the sheet or it will make the pastries stick. As soon as possible, pipe and bake the remaining batter.

LEAVE THE DOOR AJAR TO LET STEAM ESCAPE

Choux batter is not aerated—the eggs haven't been whipped, there's no baking powder, and the water has even been boiled to eliminate any tiny air bubbles—so there are no small air cells to inflate when the batter bakes. As a result, the steam that does occur collects in a small number of pockets and eventually, if all goes well, into a single large pocket. As this occurs, the batter puffs outward like a balloon and then dries to form a crisp, hollow shell.

Since profiteroles release a lot of steam as they bake, keeping the oven door open a crack (about 1½ inches) will vent this moisture and give you crisp, dry shells. This also prevents heat from building up at the top of the oven so that the profiteroles have time to rise before the outside surface of the batter sets—puffing up first and then gradually turning brown as they become dry and crisp. Getting them crisp takes longer than most cookbooks care to admit—at least 35 to 40 minutes. While an underdone



When the profiteroles are done, cool the baking sheet on a wire rack. Then slide the pastries off the baking sheet with a metal spatula.

profiterole may have a golden-brown exterior, its sodden, eggy interior will compromise the entire dessert. I test them for doneness by taking one out of the oven, letting it cool briefly, and then slicing it open. If it is still soft and moist inside, I let the rest of the profiteroles continue baking. If they start browning too much on the bottoms, reduce the oven heat.

PUT THE PIECES TOGETHER

I manage my time by making the blackberry sauce in advance (it keeps for up to three days in the refrigerator) and making the *pâte à choux* the morning of the day I plan to serve the dessert, since it's really best eaten the day it's made. Then a few hours before

Blackberries and orange juice

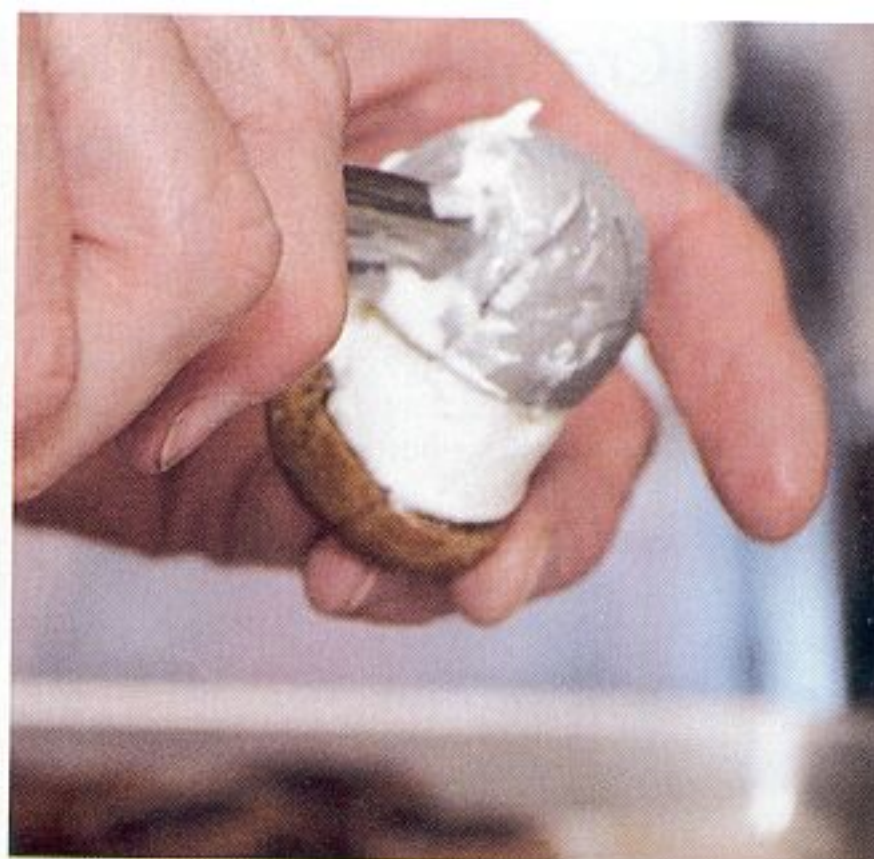


Combine the blackberries, sugar, and orange juice in a blender and process until the berries are puréed.

Line the puffs with chocolate and assemble the dessert



Cut each profiterole in half horizontally using a wavy-edge bread knife. Pull out any soft channels with your fingers to make it easier to glaze the insides with chocolate. Lay out both tops and bottoms, cut sides up, on a tray. Brush the insides of both tops and bottoms of the profiteroles with melted chocolate, using a small pastry brush to coat them evenly. Let the chocolate set. If your kitchen is warm (over 70°F), refrigerate the tray of profiteroles for 5 or 10 minutes to set the chocolate quickly.



dessert, I cut each profiterole in half, coat the insides evenly with melted chocolate, and let the chocolate set. If your kitchen is warm (over 70°F), refrigerate the tray of profiteroles for 5 or 10 minutes to set the chocolate quickly, but don't leave the profiteroles longer since condensation would soften them.

Right before serving, fill the pastries with ice cream. I like working with a small ice-cream scoop, but a pair of spoons will also work. Work quickly so that the ice cream doesn't melt. If this happens, I briefly put the filled profiteroles in the freezer until they firm up. Don't leave the filled pastries in the freezer for too long or their wonderful, dry pastry will lose its appeal.

My favorite part of this whole dessert is pouring a luxuriant cascade of thick blackberry sauce over neat pyramids of filled profiteroles and carrying the plates to the table.

Chocolate-Lined Profiteroles with Blackberry Sauce

Superfine sugar dissolves almost instantly in the puréed blackberries. If it's unavailable, use granulated sugar. Amounts of flour and butter are listed by weight (ounces) and by volume (cups or tablespoons); use either measurement. Yields about 32 to 35 profiteroles and $1\frac{1}{3}$ cups sauce; serves eight.

FOR THE CHOUX:

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup water
2 oz. (4 Tbs.) unsalted butter, cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces
1 tsp. sugar
 $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. salt
 $2\frac{1}{2}$ oz. ($\frac{1}{2}$ cup plus 2 tsp.) all-purpose flour, sifted
2 large eggs
1 large egg, lightly beaten

FOR THE BLACKBERRY SAUCE:

1 lb. fresh blackberries or thawed unsweetened frozen berries
 $\frac{1}{3}$ cup superfine sugar; more to taste if berries are especially tart
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup fresh orange juice

FOR FILLING AND SERVING:

$4\frac{1}{2}$ oz. Lindt Surfín bittersweet chocolate or other top-quality European chocolate, chopped and barely melted
 $1\frac{1}{4}$ pt. (approximately) vanilla ice cream, very firm and cold

For the procedure, follow the photos starting on p. 67.

Bruce Healy is the author of *Mastering the Art of French Pastry* (Barrons, 1984) and *The French Cookie Book* (Morrow, 1994). He teaches classes in French pastry across the country. ♦

Just before serving, scoop a small ball of ice cream onto the bottom of each profiterole. Set the top half of the profiterole on the ice cream ball and press gently.



Arrange four filled profiteroles per plate in a pyramid. Spoon about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup blackberry sauce over the profiteroles and serve immediately.

make a fresh, sweet sauce



Strain through a sieve to eliminate the seeds, pressing with a rubber spatula to extract as much of the pulp as possible. Discard the seeds. Stir the sauce to make it homogeneous. The sauce can be stored in the refrigerator, tightly covered, for up to three days. It should be just thick enough to bridge the tines of a fork. If it's too thick, add a few drops of orange juice or water.