

Bread pudding: Southern favorite, extreme comfort food

BY LIZ VAN HOOSER
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DON BURK/The Times-Union

The Chocolate Banana Walnut Bread Pudding is one of the best-selling desserts at Bistro Aix, says Tom Gray, executive chef at the San Marco restaurant. The item has been on the menu for about three years.

Ordinarily it's not much to look at. It doesn't do so well the second day. And, it's not exactly healthful.

But bread pudding is a Southern favorite. It's one of the cheaper desserts you can make (especially if you skip the hard sauce). And it's comfort food to the extreme. In these times, that's a good combination.

While it's not thought of as a traditional Thanksgiving dessert, it could make a good addition to the dessert table or a good Black Friday dish, particularly if you find yourself with a lot of leftover bread.

This story was inspired by the fantastic Chocolate Banana Walnut Bread Pudding at Bistro Aix. Tom Gray, the executive chef at the San Marco eatery, said he added his to the menu about three years ago. Warm, sweet and with a light chocolate flavor, it's now one of the restaurant's most popular desserts.

Although it's far from traditional bread pudding done with raisins and cinnamon, the dish lends itself to experimentation. Varieties also include white chocolate bread pudding, bread pudding with apples and bread pudding with mixed berries.

Sometimes called "poor man's pudding," Andy Huse, a food historian and assistant librarian at University of South Florida, said the dish probably became popular in the South, because it gives new life to leftover ingredients, a common theme in Southern cooking.

"It's recycling the old and turning it into something new," he said.

Although the approach can vary, most bread puddings use leftover or stale bread that is mixed with a combination of eggs and whole milk. Sometimes, if the mixture is very wet, the dish is cooked at low temperatures using a water bath. The easier method, and the one Gray's recipe uses, is to bake the dish in a single-serving terrine or large baking dish without the water bath.

Although bread pudding is sometimes served dry or topped with a non-alcoholic caramel sauce, Huse said that a rum, bourbon or brandy sauce makes the dish for him.

"I think it really does something great for the dish," he said. "Without it, it can be bland. It really wakes it up."

Another key to good bread pudding is eating it as soon as it emerges from the oven, so it still has a crisp top with soft, warm pudding below.

Bistro AIX CHOCOLATE BANANA WALNUT BREAD PUDDING

1 large ripe banana	
1/2 cup packed light brown sugar	2 tablespoons granulated sugar, plus more for lining the ramekins
2 tablespoons unsalted butter, plus more for greasing the ramekins	1/4 cup semisweet chocolate chips
1 pinch cinnamon	1 large egg
1 pinch nutmeg	1/4 cup walnut pieces, toasted
1 pinch ginger	1 medium loaf day-old bread, crusts removed, cut into 1/2 -inch cubes (about 1/2 pound)
1 pinch sea salt	
5 1/2 ounces heavy cream	

Heat the oven to 350 degrees.

In a small bowl, combine the banana with the brown sugar.

Mash with a fork and stir until well combined. Set aside and let rest — you will soon have a soupy mixture. In a saucepan, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger and salt and let toast in the butter. Add the cream and the granulated sugar and continue to whisk gently until the sugar has dissolved and the mixture is very warm. Add the chocolate and stir constantly until it has all melted (being careful not to let it sink to the bottom of the pan and burn).

In a large bowl, whisk the egg. While whisking, drizzle a little of the hot mixture into the egg slowly until the egg mixture is very hot. Add the walnuts and the banana mixture to the pan, then add the egg mixture to the pan. Whisk the pan contents to combine everything and bring to a simmer. Put the bread cubes in a large bowl, and pour the simmering custard over the bread. Mash the mixture with a potato masher (or wait until cool enough to handle and mash with your hands, if you prefer). Try to get the mixture as smooth as possible with no visible chunks of bread.

Brush the insides of 4 8-ounce ceramic ramekins with softened butter. Coat the buttered surfaces with a layer of sugar (this will make for easy removal of the puddings).

Divide the bread pudding among the ramekins, place in a deep roasting pan, and add water to the pan — enough to come halfway up the sides of the ramekins. Bake the puddings for 45 minutes.

To serve, carefully invert the puddings onto dessert plates. Drizzle Butter Rum Sauce over each pudding and serve each with a scoop of Creme Chantilly.

Yield: 4 servings.

Source: Chef Tom Gray, Bistro Aix.

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Bistro AIX BUTTER RUM SAUCE

1/2 cup heavy cream
1 cup plus 2 tablespoons
granulated sugar
4 tablespoons unsalted
butter, melted and
cooled slightly

1 large egg yolk
1/4 vanilla bean, scraped (or
2 teaspoons pure vanilla
extract)
3 ounces dark rum

Combine the cream, sugar, butter, yolks and vanilla bean scrapings (or vanilla extract) in a stainless steel non-reactive saucepan and whisk to combine completely. Put over medium heat and cook, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, until an instant-read thermometer inserted in the mixture reads 165 degrees.

Take the pan off the heat, whisk in the rum, then transfer the mixture to a shallow bowl set inside a larger bowl filled with ice and water. This will help cool the mixture quickly. The sauce will appear quite thin, but will thicken upon cooling.

Yield: About 2 cups.

Source: Chef Tom Gray, Bistro Aix.

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Bistro AIX CREME CHANTILLY

1 cup heavy cream, chilled
2 tablespoons granulated sugar

1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

In the work bowl of a stand mixer (or in a large bowl with a hand-held mixer), combine the cream, sugar and vanilla extract. Fit the mixer with the whisk attachment and whip on medium-low speed until all is combined and the sugar begins to dissolve. Increase the speed to medium-high, and whip until stiff peaks form.

Yield: About 1 cup.

Source: Chef Tom Gray, Bistro Aix.

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