PARIS-BREST CAKE

Makes 8 to 10 servings

The classic Paris-Brest is a choux pastry ring, filled with nougat-flavored pastry cream redolent of caramel and almonds. The pastry cream, nougatine, choux pastry ring, and whipped cream all can be made in advance, and the cake constructed just before serving. Additionally, the cake can stand for several hours, refrigerated, before serving. Individual-size cakes can be made by piping smaller rounds of choux paste.

Nougatine is a staple in the pastry kitchen. It's useful for flavoring pastry cream to use in cream puffs, éclairs, and génoise-based cakes, for flavoring buttercream frostings, and for ice cream. The powder keeps indefinitely in an airtight container. Other types of nuts, such as hazelnuts, alone or in combination with almonds, may be used.

TO PREPARE THE CAKE

1 recipe Pâte à Choux (page 277)
1 large egg, beaten
1 tablespoon thinly sliced almonds

1. Butter and flour a cookie sheet and trace a 10-inch circle in the flour. Place the pâte à choux dough in a pastry bag with a large plain tip, and pipe a ring of dough on the baking sheet, following the traced circle. Pipe another ring inside and against the first one. Pipe a third ring on top of the first two, in the seam where they join.

2. Preheat oven to 400°. Brush the dough with the beaten egg and let it dry for 10 minutes. Sprinkle on the almonds. Bake the cake for 50 minutes. During the last 5 minutes of baking, prop the oven door open a little so the steam can escape.

3. Remove the cake from the oven and let it cool in a warm place. If the cake cools too fast, it will soften. When the cake is cool, slice it horizontally, about one-third of the way from the top. The layers will be hollow.

TO PREPARE THE NOUGATINE

¾ cup sugar
3 tablespoons water
½ cup unskinned, sliced almonds

1. Lightly oil a baking sheet and set it aside. Dissolve the sugar in the water in a heavy saucepan over medium heat, stirring until it melts. Stop stirring, and watch the sugar carefully, because it will very quickly turn from sugar to caramel to a blackened mess. When the caramel is golden, quickly stir in the almonds. Pour the caramel mixture onto the baking sheet and spread it with an oiled spatula. Set it aside to cool.

2. When the nougatine is completely cool, break it into pieces, and pulverize it to a coarse powder, using a blender or a food processor fitted with the steel blade. Set it aside.

TO PREPARE THE PASTRY CREAM

4 egg yolks
⅓ cup sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla
2 tablespoons cornstarch
1¼ cups milk

1. In a small bowl, whisk together the egg yolks, sugar, and vanilla, beating the mixture vigorously until it is thick and light and forms an undulating ribbon when dropped from the whisk. Whisk in the cornstarch, mixing it until well blended.

2. Bring the milk to a boil in a heavy saucepan. Pour a ladleful of hot milk into the yolk mixture, whisking it until smooth. Pour the heated egg mixture back into the saucepan, and bring it to a boil over medium heat, stirring constantly to avoid scorching. (The cornstarch stabilizes the cream so the eggs won't curdle when it boils.)

3. Pour the pastry cream into a bowl, stir to cool it and release steam, and cover the cooled cream with plastic wrap, pressing the wrap right onto the surface of the cream. Chill.

FINAL ASSEMBLY

2 cups heavy cream
3 tablespoons confectioners' sugar
2 tablespoons dark rum

1. Stir the nougatine powder into the pastry cream, and spoon the mixture into the bottom cake layer, filling it half to three-quarters full.

2. Whip the 2 cups heavy cream. When it starts to thicken, beat in 2 tablespoons of the confectioners' sugar and the rum. Whip the cream until it forms stiff peaks.

3. Using a pastry bag fitted with a fluted tip, pipe the whipped cream over the nougatine layer so it comes about an inch above the rim. Replace the top cake layer, sprinkle on the remaining confectioners' sugar, using a sieve, and serve.

NOTE

For individual cakes, pipe single rings of choux paste about 3 inches wide on buttered and floured baking sheets, and proceed as directed above. Bake the rings a shorter period, about 20 to 30 minutes, or until they are golden brown.

PÂTE À CHOUX

Makes 12 cream puffs

Pâte à choux, also called cream-puff paste, is the basic dough for cream puffs, gougères, Paris-Brest Cake (page 279), and éclairs. Made from a roux-like paste called panade (flour, water, and butter) and beaten eggs, the paste can be used to make sweet or savory dishes. Recipes can vary rather widely in proportions of flour, fat, and eggs, but in general the greater the amount of egg in the paste, the lighter the result; and the more eggs you use, the less fat (butter) is needed. Recipes richest in fat are best used for small choux pastries.

Pâte à choux is ordinarily used immediately, but it may be refrigerated and brought to a warm temperature by beating it vigorously over heat for a minute or two. Be careful when reheating it: if the eggs get too hot and cook, the pastry won't puff. Be sure to bake puffs thoroughly, or they'll collapse when they cool. After baking larger puffs and éclairs, cut a small hole in the side near the top to allow steam to escape (this will help keep them from becoming soggy) and return them to the turned-off oven for a few minutes, to dry.

1 cup water
6 tablespoons unsalted butter
¼ teaspoon salt
5 ounces (about 1 cup) unbleached, all-purpose flour
5 large eggs
2 teaspoons sugar (optional for sweetened choux paste)

1. Bring the water, butter, and salt to a boil in a porcelain-covered cast-iron pan or other heavy saucepan. Remove the pan from the heat, and stir in the flour all at once. (For sweet pastry, add the sugar.) Beat the mixture vigorously with a wooden spoon to blend it well. Return the pan to the heat and beat the mixture over medium-high heat until it leaves the sides of the pan and forms a ball. Remove the pan from the heat.

2. Scrape the panade into a clean bowl, and allow it to cool. Using an electric mixer on medium speed, or working by hand with a wooden spoon, beat in 1 egg at a time, making certain that the egg is thoroughly incorporated before adding the next one. The choux is ready to use when it is glistening, velvety, and about the consistency of thick mayonnaise.

3. Spoon the mixture into a pastry bag fitted with a plain tip, and pipe out puffs on a lightly greased baking sheet. They may be made dime-size, 1 inch, or 3 inches in diameter. Dime-size puffs are used to garnish consommé and other soups. One-inch puffs may be filled with savory mixtures for

hors d'oeuvres. Larger puffs may be filled with a fish or vegetables in cream sauce, sweetened whipped cream, or flavored pastry cream.

4. Preheat oven to 425°. Bake dime-size puffs for 10 minutes, 1-inch puffs for 20 minutes. Three-inch puffs should bake for 20 minutes at 425°, then bake an additional 10 to 15 minutes at 375°. The puffs may then be slit and returned to the turned-off oven for another 10 minutes, to let them dry.

SAVORIES

Savory choux paste

Omit the sugar and add a dash of freshly ground pepper and nutmeg to the pan with the butter and water, and increase the salt slightly.

Gougères

To savory choux paste, omit the sugar and add 2 ounces of finely diced or grated Gruyère cheese. Other types of hard cheese may be substituted. Bake small puffs. Fill them with cheese sauce or one of the savory sauces from chapter 8.