

Brown Sugar-Buttermilk Snack Cake with Blackberries and Caramel-Walnut Drizzle

Serves 9 to 12

Recipes can develop in many ways. In this instance, I had the idea of combining buttermilk, brown sugar, and blackberries—the combo “tasted” good in my head, so I set about putting them together in the kitchen. It worked. This is a simple, velvety crumbed cake made with buttermilk and dark brown sugar for a pronounced caramel flavor. Fresh blackberries offer pockets of deep purple, juicy fruitiness, and their distinct flavor stands up to the brown sugar. To further enhance the caramel notes, a brown sugar caramel icing is drizzled on top. This cake is perfect to bring into the office for a special day—perhaps a birthday coffee break for a friend.

Cake

1 1/2 cups sifted cake flour
Heaping 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1/8 teaspoon salt
6 tablespoons (3/4 stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature, cut into pieces
1/3 cup firmly packed dark brown sugar
1 large egg, at room temperature
1/2 cup plus 1 tablespoon low-fat buttermilk, at room temperature
1 cup fresh blackberries

Icing

1/3 cup firmly packed dark brown sugar
3 tablespoons unsalted butter, at room temperature
2 1/2 tablespoons heavy cream
3/4 cup sifted confectioners' sugar
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/3 cup walnut halves, toasted and chopped

For the Cake

Position a rack in the middle of the oven. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Coat an 8-inch square pan with nonstick spray.

- 1) Whisk together the flour, baking soda, and salt in a medium bowl to aerate and combine; set aside.
- 2) In the bowl of a stand mixer, beat the butter with the flat paddle attachment on medium-high speed until creamy, about 1 minute. Add the brown sugar and beat until light and fluffy, about 3 minutes, scraping down the bowl once or twice. Beat in the egg until well combined. Add the flour mixture in two additions, alternately with the buttermilk. Begin and end with the flour mixture and beat briefly until smooth. Scrape the batter evenly into the pan and smooth the top with an offset spatula. It will be a fairly shallow layer. Scatter the blackberries evenly on top, reserving about 5 of them; do not press into the batter, as they will sink during baking.
- 3) Bake for 15 to 25 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the center shows a few moist crumbs when removed. The cake will just have begun to come away from the sides of the pan. Cool in the pan on a rack before decorating.

For the Icing

Combine the brown sugar, butter, and cream in a small saucepan and bring to a simmer over medium-high heat. Simmer for 1 minute, whisking frequently. Remove from the

heat and whisk in the confectioners' sugar and vanilla until smooth and fluid. It will firm up very quickly, and if you whisk or cool it for too long, it will become too firm and sugary. Use a spoon to immediately drizzle about half the icing all over the top of the cake, then quickly sprinkle the walnuts and reserved berries evenly over the top while the icing is still wet. Drizzle with the remaining icing, which will set up almost immediately, and serve. Store at room temperature, well wrapped in plastic wrap for up to 1 day.

Tips: You might be tempted to add extra berries to the batter, but they add too much moisture and will throw off the balance of the cake. Also, when making the icing, make sure you stop combining the ingredients the moment the mixture becomes smooth. If it becomes grainy and sandy, you have stirred too long and must start again.

Concord Grape Gelée Panna Cotta Parfait

Serves 6

I cannot get enough of the incomparable, musky, aromatic flavor of Concord grapes. Unfortunately, they have a very short season and are often hard to find. They also have a tough skin and are full of large seeds. Concord grape juice, however, is available in most supermarkets, and I have put it to good use here in two forms: It makes a generous portion of dark purple gelée, layered beneath a creamy panna cotta, and it is reduced into a sauce for a seedless red grape compote, which crowns the parfait. The result is a dessert that is filled with Concord grape flavor, without the fuss.

Concord Grape Gelée

2 cups 100% grape juice, such as Welch's
2 teaspoons unflavored powdered gelatin

Panna Cotta

1 cup milk
2 1/4 teaspoons unflavored powdered gelatin
4 1/2 tablespoons sugar
2 cups heavy cream

Grape Compote

12 ounces small or medium red seedless grapes (about 2 cups), sliced in half lengthwise
3 cups 100% grape juice, such as Welch's
1/2 cup sugar

For the Gelée

Have ready six 10- to 12-ounce clear wineglasses. Pour about 1/4 cup of the grape juice in a saucepan and sprinkle the gelatin over; allow to sit for 5 minutes to soften. Begin to melt the mixture over very low heat, add the remaining juice, and whisk gently until the gelatin is completely dissolved. Strain through a fine-mesh strainer into a large measuring cup or pitcher with a spout. Divide the mixture between the glasses. Refrigerate for at least 4 hours, or until set.

For the Panna Cotta

Pour the milk into a large saucepan. Sprinkle the gelatin over and set aside for 5 minutes to soften the gelatin. Heat over very low heat, stirring gently, until the gelatin dissolves. Add the sugar; stir to help dissolve. Stir in the cream and heat just until warm and absolutely all the sugar is dissolved and the mixture is well combined. Strain into a large pitcher and cool to barely warm. Divide the panna cotta mixture between the goblets, pouring very slowly and gently over the gelée. Refrigerate for at least 4 hours, or until set. Or refrigerate for up to 1 day, covering the tops of the goblets with plastic wrap.

For the Compote

Put the sliced grapes in a heatproof bowl; set aside. Pour the juice and sugar into a medium saucepan and whisk to combine. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat and simmer until reduced to about 1 cup; this will take quite a while—at least 20 minutes. Watch carefully. As it reduces, the aroma will become more pronounced, and bubbles that slowly pop open will cover the surface. The mixture will start to reduce very quickly at this point. Once it is slightly thick and syrupy, pour over the grapes and gently toss to coat. Allow to cool to room temperature. Cover with plastic wrap and store at room temperature for up to 6 hours.

For Serving

Simply divide the compote between the glasses and serve immediately.

Tips: As with any dessert requiring gelatin, accurate measuring is important; too much gelatin and the texture will be overly firm. When making the compote, it does take a while to reduce the juice mixture, but watch it carefully because it can overly reduce and burn quite easily, ruining your pan. Believe me; I know.