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Cupcakes and Clambakes

By Susie Iventosch



Chow Bella booth at the Farmers' Market. Customers Tom Leserman and Jenny Leserman. Behind the table; (left to right) Jenny Smit, Lindsay Simpson, Elaine Smit and Katy Simpson Photo Andy Scheck

If you haven't met up with the Chow Bella girls and their cupcake booth at the Moraga Farmers' Market you don't know what you're missing. Actually, I don't even know what I'm missing because I haven't tried their most famous cupcake yet ... the Mocha Cupcake. Perfected by Chow Bella partner Katy Simpson over many hours in the kitchen, the Chow Bella foursome prefers to keep that one a closely held secret for the time being. But, I have tried their divine Vanilla Bean Lemon Curd Cupcake.

Chow Bella founder Elaine Smit offered to part with this recipe and my friends and I are very glad she did. This little cupcake is light and airy with just the right amount of tart curd filling in the middle and buttercream frosting on top. The recipe calls for Meyer lemons, which are plentiful in many home gardens in the Lamorinda area, and if you don't have a tree of your own, a neighbor probably does. If not, try it with regular lemons from the grocery store. I did and the cupcakes were still wonderful.

Elaine started Chow Bella several years ago to share her love of cooking with others.

"It all started when three of my good friends and I were involved with the Buena Vista Auxiliary, a charity organization in Walnut Creek," Elaine noted. "Since we all had a passion for cooking gourmet food we thought that we could donate to our annual fundraiser, 'A Toast to Tutoring' a wine tasting silent auction."

The four friends donated the preparation and delivery of several gourmet meals throughout the year to the highest bidder. The donation was a hit and they kept it up for a few years. This group of young moms also enjoyed cooking together to prepare meals to freeze for eating on one of those days, when life is simply too rushed to fix a nice meal! (If I could have about a dozen of those lemony cupcakes in the freezer at all times, my appetite would be perfectly content on those harried days!)

They also made a habit of taking in cooking classes all around the Bay Area, from Andronico's and Home Chef in Walnut Creek to the Culinary Academy in San Francisco. One day, Colleen and Elaine took a day-long cooking class from Thomas Keller of the French Laundry in Yountville in the Napa Valley.

"At the end of the cooking day, the entire class was invited to the French Laundry for dinner, wine and music," Elaine fondly remembers.

Elaine feels fortunate to have many friends and family who support and encourage her efforts. Due to the success of Chow Bella, she called upon her most trusted foodie friends to join her in the business.

"They keep me going," she says. "I couldn't do it without the involvement of Katy, Colleen and Rebecca. They play important roles from the baking to teaching the kids' classes and making every dish look beautiful."

Katy (Cupcake) Simpson is the heart and soul behind the beautiful dessert creations, while Colleen Wheaton has the creative eye for plate presentation and food design. Trained at the San Francisco Culinary Academy and also possessing a degree in fashion design, Colleen has a real knack for food styling. Rebecca Sullivan, who also trained at the San Francisco Culinary Academy, studied culinary arts and is a natural at teaching. She heads up the Chow Bella Kids Cooking Program.

Chow Bella has a host of great party ideas and a scrumptious selection of catering menus, but this week we're featuring the Vanilla Bean Lemon Curd cupcakes as a tiny glimpse into the bakery portion of the business. Since Chow Bella has been asked by clients to create traditional east coast clambakes for summertime parties, we'll feature their recipe for clambakes using three different cooking methods in the next issue of Lamorinda Weekly.

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Vanilla Bean Lemon Curd Cupcakes

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Lemon Curd

(Makes enough for 2 dozen cupcakes)

1 cup sugar

Zest of 3 lemons

3 large eggs

4 large egg yolks

1 cup Meyer lemon juice

5 ounces unsalted butter,

chilled and cut into small pieces

Prepare and ice-water bath. Set a medium bowl in ice-water bath and set aside. Place sugar and lemon zest in a mortar and grind with a pestle to combine and release the oils. Transfer sugar mixture to a medium heatproof bowl along with eggs and egg yolks; whisk to combine.

Place over a saucepan of simmering water and whisk until sugar has dissolved. Add lemon juice and continue whisking until mixture is thick and reaches 160 degrees on an instant-read thermometer, scraping down sides of bowl as necessary. Add butter and whisk until well combined.

Strain lemon mixture through a fine mesh sieve set over prepared bowl. Cover lemon curd with plastic wrap, pressing plastic wrap directly onto surface. Transfer to refrigerator until completely chilled.

Vanilla Bean Cupcakes

2 cups cake flour

2 teaspoons baking powder

2 teaspoons kosher salt

12 tablespoons unsalted butter (1 1/2 sticks), at room temperature

1 1/2 cups granulated sugar

1 vanilla bean, split lengthwise and scraped, seeds reserved (or 1 tablespoon vanilla extract)

2 large egg whites, at room temperature

2 large eggs, at room temperature

3/4 cup whipping cream at room temperature

Heat the oven to 350°F and arrange a rack in the middle. Line 2 (12-well) muffin pans with paper liners. Alternatively, coat the wells with butter; set aside. Combine flour, baking powder, and salt in a medium bowl and whisk to aerate and break up any lumps; set aside.

Place butter in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment and beat on medium-high speed until very light in color, about 3 minutes. Add sugar and vanilla seeds (if you're using vanilla extract instead, you'll add it later), and continue beating until mixture is airy, about 3 minutes.

Scrape down the paddle and the sides of the bowl, turn the mixer to medium speed, and add egg whites one at a time, beating well after each addition. Then add eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition.

Add milk (and vanilla extract, if you're using it in place of seeds), and mix until combined (the mixture will look curdled, but it's not). Scrape down the sides of the bowl. Reduce speed to low, add flour mixture, and mix until just combined, about 15 seconds.

Fill the muffin wells about halfway, and bake cupcakes until golden brown and a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean, about 18 minutes. Set the pans on a wire rack and let cool for 5 minutes. Remove cupcakes from the pans and let cool completely before frosting and filling with lemon curd.

Remove small piece of center of cupcake with apple corer. Fill with small amount of lemon curd (put lemon curd in plastic condiment bottle for easy filling)

Vanilla Bean Buttercream

2 cups unsalted butter, softened, cut into pieces

3 ½ cups powdered sugar, sifted

pinch of salt

1 vanilla bean, scraped

1 tsp vanilla

¼ cup whole milk or whipping cream

Beat butter until creamy. Slowly add powdered sugar, until combined. Add vanilla bean seeds and vanilla. Slowly add milk or cream and beat until creamy – about 5 minutes.

Frost cupcakes, dip in sanding sugar, and top with raspberry if desired.

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