

Luscious poached pears are a Valentine's Day treat

BY MELANIE POLK
SPECIAL WRITER

It wouldn't be Valentine's Day without sweets, so it's fortunate that clever cooks have developed lots of ways to enjoy delicious treats that won't make you feel guilty about the indulgence.

Candied citrus zest adds fat-free color, texture and flavor to mousses, custards and other smooth desserts. In a medium-sized saucepan set over medium-high heat, combine 1 cup water and cup fresh, very thin match-stick-length strips of lemon, lime, orange or grapefruit zest (completely free of any white pith).

Bring to a boil and cook 3 minutes. Rinse zest under cool water in a sieve and let drain. Rinse out the saucepan, add 1/3 cup granulated sugar, 1 tablespoon light corn syrup and 2-1/2 tablespoons water, and stir until blended. Bring mixture to a simmer over medium-high heat, cover and simmer for 2 minutes.

Stir drained zests strips into the syrup, bring to a simmer again and cook, stirring occasionally, 3 to 4 minutes until zest is tender and translucent. Remove zest shreds with a fork, spread on a sheet of wax paper, and cool. If you wish, save the syrup and drizzle it over fresh or poached fruit.

Meringue kisses are light and sweet and can be made in a variety of flavors — vanilla, chocolate, almond, orange or lemon. Serve them with fresh fruit or berries, or make meringue "sandwiches" filled with your favorite fruit preserves. Preheat the oven to 250 degrees and line 2 cookie sheets with foil. In a large bowl, combine 3 large egg whites (at room temperature), 1/8 tsp. cream of tartar and 1/3 tsp. salt. Using an electric mixer on medium speed, whip until foamy. Gradually add 3/4 cup granulated sugar and whip until the whites hold medium-stiff peaks. Add 1 teaspoon vanilla extract and 1/2 teaspoon almond extract and whip until the whites are satiny and hold stiff peaks.

Drop the meringue by teaspoonfuls onto the prepared sheets and bake for 40 to 45 minutes, until the tops of the kisses feel dry to the touch. Set the sheets on a rack to cool for 3 to 5 minutes, then peel away the backing paper or foil.

For orange or lemon kisses, reduce the vanilla to 1/4 tsp. and omit the almond extract, add 1 teaspoon orange or lemon extract plus 2 teaspoons grated orange or lemon zest. For chocolate kisses, fold 2 tablespoons sifted unsweetened cocoa into the

whipped meringue, leaving it slightly streaked.

Chocolate is a Valentine's Day tradition, and Poached Pears with Chocolate Sauce is a luscious way to enjoy this holiday favorite.

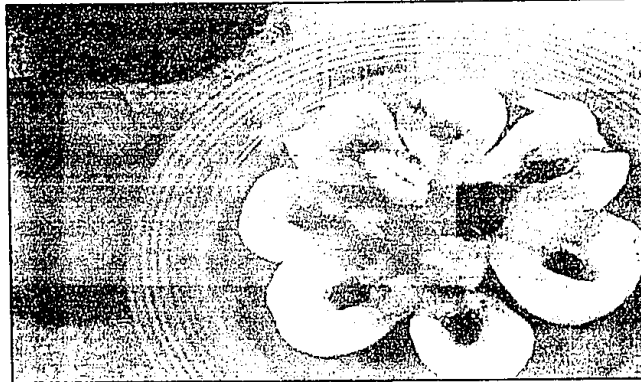
POACHED PEARS WITH CHOCOLATE SAUCE

2 1/2 cups water
1/2 cup granulated sugar
Grated rind and juice of 1 lemon
1 cinnamon stick
4 pears
4 tablespoons chocolate syrup
Sliced strawberries for garnish

In large saucepan, combine water, sugar, lemon rind, lemon juice, and cinnamon stick. Bring to a boil, stirring until sugar is dissolved.

Peel, halve and core pears. Add pears to boiling syrup. (Pears should be covered in liquid; if not, double the amount of poaching liquid or poach in batches.)

Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer gently for 15 to 20 minutes or until pears are almost tender (time will vary depending on



Holiday treat: Poached pears with chocolate sauce is a tasty way to celebrate Valentine's Day or any special occasion.

ripeness and type of pear; remember, pears will continue to cook while cooling). Remove from heat and let cool in liquid.

Drain pears thoroughly and pat dry on paper towels. Arrange pear

halves on individual plates. Drizzle with chocolate syrup. Serve at room temperature.

Nutrition information: Each of the 8 servings contains 119

calories and less than one gram of fat.

Recipe and information provided by Melanie Polk, Director of Nutrition Education, American Institute for Cancer Research.

New 'Hot Vegetables' cookbook features great risotto

AP — "Hot Vegetables" (Ten Speed Press, \$17.95), by food writer Hugh Carpenter and his wife, photographer Teri Sanderson, is the latest in their "Hot" series of cookbooks. Among the others were "Hot Wok," "Hot Chicken" and "Hot Pasta."

The new book features 60 dishes using vegetables, arranged alphabetically from artichokes to zucchini. After cabbage, and before cauliflower, comes the following recipe for Carrot Risotto.

On risottos in general, the authors comment: "Great risotto depends on several factors. Use only arborio rice, which absorbs large amounts of flavorful liquid while retaining a marvelously firm texture. ... Rather than try-

ing to precook the risotto, which some chefs recommend, cook the risotto at the last moment and stir the rice frequently. The instant the rice no longer has a raw texture but still is firm, it should be served."

If you want a more intense carrot taste, they say, cook the rice with 1 cup shredded carrots, or stir 1/4 cup of fresh carrot juice into the risotto toward the end of cooking.

Accompany the dish with a blue cheese and watercress salad, and finish with an apple tart for dessert.

CARROT RISOTTO

1/4 cup unsalted butter or olive oil

2 tablespoons finely minced ginger
3 bunches baby carrots, or 1 bunch medium carrots
6 cups vegetable or chicken broth
1/4 cup dry vermouth or white wine
1 teaspoon grated orange zest
1/2 teaspoon Asian chile sauce
1 cup arborio rice
1/4 cup chopped basil leaves
1/4 cup chopped parsley
1 cup freshly grated imported Parmesan cheese
Salt and pepper to taste

Advance preparation: Combine the butter with the ginger and set aside. Remove the stems and peel the carrots. Cut the carrots on a sharp diagonal. Bring 2 quarts of water to a boil, stir in the carrots and cook until they become tender, about 3 to 5 minutes. Immediately transfer the carrots to a bowl filled with cold water and ice; when chilled, drain and pat the carrots dry; refrigerate. In a saucepan, combine the broth, dry vermouth, grated orange zest and chile sauce;

refrigerate. Set aside the rice. (All advance preparation steps may be completed up to 4 hours before you begin the final steps.)

Final steps: Chop the herbs. Grate the cheese. Place the saucepan holding the broth over low heat, bring it to a low simmer and maintain it at this temperature. Place a 3-quart saucepan over medium heat. Add the butter and ginger. Sauté the ginger for 20 seconds. Add the rice and saute

briefly. Add 1/3 of the broth. Continue stirring occasionally. Every time the liquid disappears, add another ladle of the hot broth. When the rice just tastes tender, after about 20 minutes total cooking time, stir in the carrots. After two more minutes, stir in the herbs and the cheese. Taste and adjust the seasonings, especially the salt and pepper. Serve at once. Makes 4 servings as an entree or 4 to 6 as a side dish.

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