
FOR A GOOD TIME ...

The Cheesecake Stands Alone

IT TAKES JUST ONE CLASS TO LEARN THE ART OF THIS DESSERT BUT A LOT OF CLASS TO REPEAT THE TRICK

By Serena Bass

Let's talk about cheesecake for a minute... or 15.

I gave a cooking class last night, and we made a key lime cheesecake for dessert. For such a seemingly easy thing, I found I simply couldn't stop giving little hints and explanations about how to make it and make it turn out well.

First of all, I had bought key limes. Ha! Have you ever

tried squeezing a key lime?

You need fairy fingers and Popeye muscles. Basically they are very withholding and don't really want to let you have any juice. They only deserve to be cut in quarters, pounded with a mallet and used in mojitos.

So, luckily (was it luck, or just a brooding suspicion that they would be needed?) I had also bought normal

limes as understudies.

Limes with a smooth skin — those are the juicers — and a slight give when you press them. The rough-skinned, harder limes are usually not too juicy and will often prolong your quest for a quarter of a cup of juice.

If you follow this recipe, you will be using a springform pan. Have you noticed that the base is

NOMAD EDITIONS REAL EATS



Like crack: The author's first attempt — delicious, but slightly flawed. TORKIL STAVDAL

usually flat on one side and slightly recessed on the other side? Just fit the base in with the flat side *up* so when you want to loosen the cake and

slide it onto a plate you can, without having to dig the crust out of the recess.

The Dense and

the Fluffy

In class we had a show of hands. Who liked a dense creamy cheesecake? (Me.) Who wanted fluffy and soft?



TORKIL STAVDAL

(A couple.) So I adapted my original recipe to allow for the fluffy lovers (see Note B in the recipe). Never say I'm not accommodating!

On first testing this recipe, I had left the kitchen thinking the cheesecake could metamorphose from creamy to cake all by itself. I

was in the next-door room and found myself involuntarily wiping a tear from my eye, *not* having a wistful moment, but reacting

NOMAD EDITIONS REAL EATS

to the acrid smoke that was pouring out of the stove and, having already filled the kitchen, was billowing into the dining room. As I have seen done on *Rescue Me*, I draped something — actually a rather pretty pink silk napkin — over my head (Coco Chanel would have fashioned it into a turban in seconds) and fought my way to the stove.

Butter had dripped out of the pan and hit the floor of the oven, creating a greasy form of tear gas. I didn't know what to do first: mop up the butter or fling open the windows and doors. I flung first. Then I dunked paper towels in water squirted with a little Palmolive and, using long tongs, swabbed up the butter

as best I could. It worked fairly well, but this must *never happen again* I decided. So nowadays I put a sheet pan with two cups of water in it on the bottom shelf of the oven. Two things: Firstly, *if* any butter drips out, it lands harmlessly on the water and secondly, I believe the steamy atmosphere helps keep the surface of the cheesecake from drying and becoming in any way leathery while in the oven.

Graham, Gnashed

Concerning the leaking butter, I got all scientific on myself and wondered why. Had I crushed the graham crackers and ground the nuts sufficiently to actually hold

the butter in place? I thought probably not. I don't buy pre-ground graham cracker crumbs because I wouldn't use them that often. Cheesecake with its, hmm... 400 (!) calories per slice, is a rare treat. But graham crackers on their own with a slab of salted butter for a midnight snack, that works, so I usually just buy a box of whole crackers and when making cheesecake, just crush them. I used to roll them, in a Ziploc bag, using a rolling pin, but that's not really fine enough, so now they go, pre-smashed-up a bit, in the food processor — much better. Ditto with the nuts, I had thought, let's keep those nuts crunchy chunky, yum! But no, they must be ground finely, too. I

had used almonds on the first cheesecake I tested, and I couldn't particularly taste them in the crust. Anyway, I used up all my almonds, so the next crust was made with skinned, unsalted peanuts, which I measured and flipped around in a dry pan over medium heat for about six minutes. They ground up willingly and, with the cracker crumbs and spices, pressed obediently into the pan. When I tasted the end result, it was one of those road to Damascus moments: The crust was redolent of toasty peanuts, and the whole was infinitely more than the sum of its parts. It was nothing short of sensational.

And, dear people, having crossed my fingers that you

have a food processor... do you have a spice grinder?? And not just a coffee grinder that you chuck whole spices into? I have started *only* using home-ground cinnamon and home-grated nutmeg. What a truly shock-and-awe difference! The people in the cooking class were amazed at the sweetness and power of freshly ground cinnamon. If you don't have a spice grinder, you could use a mortar and pestle, but in order to get the cinnamon for the crust finely ground, after smacking the stick to break it into shards, you would have to toast the shards lightly in a small pan, and then it would crush quite easily with the pestle. (I'm sure you're all wanting

me to get realistic 'round about now.)

However, on the second experimental test of this cake, I had a spice grinder full of Moroccan spices for something else I was cooking, so I just took a stick of cinnamon and grated it (vigorously, I must say) on my Microplane zester. I had half a teaspoon in no time. Gosh... how about that, I thought.

The Soft Sell

Shall we move on to the cheesecake itself because I'm not done by a long chalk?

In the bad old days, I used to soften the cream cheese in the microwave. I've over-softened it more than once and on flinging open the microwave door have

found a boiling mess of dairy product that used to be cream cheese. Infuriating, as I only had myself to blame: hate that!

So, if that happened, I would get back from shopping for more Philadelphia in a pretty cranky mood, and — with some well softened cream cheese finally in hand — I would mix it very slowly in my Kenwood standing electric mixer, employing the paddle beater, *not* the balloon whisk, trying to avoid beating in air while adding the eggs, and simultaneously trying to break down any lumps, thereby make a lovely smooth mixture. This run-on sentence is quite as tortuous as the procedure used to be.

One day I thought ‘fork this’ (an Irish expression), and I just put all the ingredients in the food processor. Admittedly the cream cheese was perfectly at room temperature, as I had left it on the counter overnight. I pulsed 10 times, then let the machine run for five seconds and, as people who don’t really speak French say, *wa-la!* Perfectly smooth, no air incorporated, I removed the blade and — pleased as Punch — poured the mixture straight into the waiting crust.

After at least three “What’s it doing, is it done yet?” inspections, the cheesecake cooked perfectly and in less time than I had expected — why, I don’t know. After I took the first

experimental cheesecake out of the oven, I did something gratuitously time-wasting, like, err... gazing out of the window for a few minutes and thinking how adorable my dog looked lying in the sun then... *whap!* I was bitch-slapped back to reality. A horrible crack was slicing across the smooth surface of the cheesecake, and then another one started, branching off the first. I noticed with a frown that the cheesecake was stuck to the rim of the pan so, fast-forward to cheesecake number two. (Fast for you, sweet cheeks, not for me.)

I took number two out of the oven and then, clumsily negotiating with a potholder because the pan was still hot, I immediately ran a small

sharp knife around the inside of the pan, pressing against the metal to keep the cut clean. The number two seemed to breathe a sigh of relief, the tension was released, it relaxed smoothly, and remained crack-free.

So that's pretty much all I've got, except that the only way to cut a clean slice is to use a hot knife. I just bring a "blade-height" opaque vase filled with very hot water to the table and dip a chef's knife in the water after every cut, wiping it briefly on a paper towel. Opaque is better than clear glass as eventually the cheesecake clouds the water and it all looks a bit mucky. Don't worry, I guarantee people are either interested to see

how well this works, too polite to say anything, or always do the same thing themselves at home. A little caveat: If your dinner party is uber-elegant, I would probably just do the slicing in the kitchen before everyone arrives.

Or you could just buy a cheesecake from a shop.

Key Lime Cheesecake

This recipe makes a dense, creamy cheesecake. If you would prefer a lighter, fluffier cheesecake, refer to Note B (below).

Before starting, Position one rack in the lower third of the oven and one on the bottom. Preheat to 350 degrees F. Be sure to have on hand:

- One 9-inch springform pan, ungreased, or, for the lighter cheesecake, a 10-inch springform pan, ungreased
- 1 sheet pan

THE CRUST

- 1 cup graham cracker crumbs
- 1 cup peanuts, dry pan-toasted over medium-low heat for 6 minutes
- 1/3 cup sugar
- 1 1/2 teaspoons ground ginger
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon grated whole nutmeg

- 5 tablespoons melted unsalted butter
- ¼ teaspoon salt

1. Combine all the ingredients in a bowl then press into a 9-inch springform pan, bringing the mixture up the sides by about an inch. For a 10-inch pan, just press onto the base in an even layer.

2. Put the sheet pan with 2 cups of water on the lowest shelf of the oven and set the cheesecake pan on the shelf above. (See Note A, below.)

3. Bake for 8 minutes then remove from the oven and set aside.

THE FILLING

- 2 8-ounce packets Philadelphia cream cheese, well softened
- ¾ cup sugar
- 4 extra-large eggs at room temperature
- 1 cup sour cream, at room temperature
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- Grated zest of one lime (or 3 key limes)
- ¼ cup lime juice

1. Put all the ingredients in a food processor and pulse 10 times, then blend for 5 seconds.

2. Pour into the pan and

bake for 45 minutes (5-10 minutes longer for the fluffy cheesecake), or until just set.

3. Remove from the oven and immediately run a small knife around the circumference to release the cheesecake, otherwise it will crack. Refrigerate overnight or for at least 3 hours.

4. Serve with fresh strawberries sweetened to taste and pulsed in a food processor to make a sauce.

NOTES

A. The crust might leak butter onto the sheet pan. When you put the filled crust back into the oven, leave the sheet pan in place and the steam will help prevent

cracking.

B. For a lighter cheesecake, reserve 2 egg whites and 2 tablespoons of sugar. When you have processed the cheesecake, beat the egg whites until very foamy, add the sugar and beat to a fairly stiff meringue. Pour the cheesecake mixture over the meringue and fold together gently. NB: If you do this, you will need a 10-inch pan rather than a 9-inch one. 🍷