

Cassata Siciliana

For the Spongecake:

5 large room-temperature eggs, separated
¾ cup sugar
1 cup flour
1 tablespoon lemon juice
Zest of 1 lemon
⅛ teaspoon cream of tartar

For the Icing

2½ cups powdered sugar
2 tablespoons strained lemon juice
¼ cup water

For the Fillings

1 pound whole-milk ricotta
⅓ cup powdered sugar
¾ cup of heavy cream
2 teaspoons vanilla
¼ cup bittersweet chocolate chips
¼ cup chopped raw pistachios
¼ cup candied orange peel
¼ cup candied pineapple

For the Syrup

½ cup sugar
½ cup water
1-2 tablespoons of Grand Marnier

For the Cake

Preheat oven to 350°. Butter and flour an 9-inch cake pan. In a large bowl, beat the egg yolks, the lemon zest, and lemon juice until thickened. Gradually beat in ½ cup of the sugar, and continue to beat until the mixture forms a slowly dissolving ribbon. Beat the egg whites until foamy and sprinkle on the cream of tartar. Continue to beat until soft peaks are formed. Gradually beat in the remaining ¼ cup of sugar until stiff peaks are formed.

Stir in 1/3 of the beaten egg whites into the yolk mixture with a rubber spatula. Sprinkle 1/3 of the flour through a sieve into the batter and fold in carefully. Fold in the remaining 2/3 egg whites and flour, alternately by thirds. Pour the batter into the prepared cake pan and bake in the middle level of the oven for about 30-35 minutes. When a cake tester comes out clean, remove the cake to a wire rack, and let cool for ten minutes. Run a knife carefully around the edges, and invert onto the rack. Let cool completely. The cake maybe made a day or two ahead of time and frozen in a plastic bag. When ready to assemble, cut into three even layers.

For the Fillings

Place the ricotta in a paper-towel-lined sieve over a bowl to drain any liquid. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for a few hours or overnight.

Put the drained ricotta in the bowl of a food processor with the vanilla extract, and process until smooth. Place the powdered sugar in a sieve over the food-processor bowl, and sift into the ricotta. Process again until the sugar is fully incorporated. Scrape into a bowl and refrigerate.

Whip the heavy cream in a chilled bowl until firm peaks are formed. Blend ⅓ of the whipped cream into the ricotta mixture, then gently fold in the remaining cream. Remove half the mixture to another bowl.

Fold in the chocolate chips and the candied orange peel into one bowl of ricotta filling. Fold in the chopped pistachios and the candied pineapple into the other bowl of ricotta filling. Place both bowls in the refrigerator while you continue.

For the Syrup

Place the sugar and water in a small, heavy saucepan, and mix thoroughly. Place over medium heat, and bring to a boil, stirring occasionally, and washing down any sugar crystals that have formed on the side of the pan, with a wet pastry brush. Allow the syrup to fully cool, then stir in the Grand Marnier to taste.

Molding the Dessert

Rub 1 tablespoon of vegetable or other flavorless oil in the same pan in which you baked the cake. Slice the cake into three even layers. Fit the bottom layer, bottom side down into the pan. (This will become the top layer of the dessert.) Brush the layer with the syrup.

Spread one of the ricotta mixtures over the bottom cake layer. Brush both sides of the middle cake layer with the syrup, and press onto the ricotta mixture in the cake pan. Spread the second ricotta mixture over middle cake layer. Brush the cut side of the top cake layer with syrup and press onto that ricotta mixture. Cover the cake with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for several hours or overnight.

Unmolding and Decorating the Dessert

Remove the cake from the refrigerator, and run a thin-bladed knife carefully around the edge. Fill the sink with about an inch of hot water. Submerge the cake pan in the hot water for a few seconds to help loosen it, then invert the cake onto the center of a serving plate. Refrigerate the cake while you prepare the icing.

Icing the Cake

Sift the powdered sugar into a heavy saucepan to eliminate any lumps. Stir in the strained lemon juice into the sugar, then by tablespoons stir in the water until you get a glaze that's not too runny, but can still be poured from the pan. Place the pan over low heat, stirring constantly until the sugar is dissolved. You may have to adjust with more water or powdered sugar to attain the right consistency.

Working quickly before the glaze sets, pour it over the cake, smoothing the top until it achieves a fine sheen. Let the glaze run over the sides, but it's almost impossible to smooth out the glaze on the sides of the cake. Chill the cake for one hour.

Decorate the top of the cake with pieces of candied fruit and whole pistachios. Keep refrigerated until serving time.