

Pear Charlotte

For the Mousse

5-7 ripe, but firm, pears
3 cups plus 2 tablespoons sugar
Juice of 1 Meyer or regular lemon
Half a vanilla bean
2-3 tablespoons pear liqueur
1 package, plus ½ teaspoon gelatin
1¼ cups heavy cream

For the Chocolate Sauce

½ pound semisweet chocolate
½ cup boiling water
2 tablespoons softened butter

To Poach and Purée the Pears

Dissolve 3 cups of sugar in one quart of cold water. Split the vanilla bean, juice the Meyer or regular lemon, and add them to the water/sugar mixture. Bring the mixture to a boil.

Carefully peel the pears and submerge each one as you peel it into ice water to keep it from browning. Once all the pears are peeled, removed them from the ice water one at a time, cut them in half, removing the stem and the core. Rub each pear half with the squeezed lemon, again to prevent coloring.

Add the pears to the boiling syrup and place a lid from a smaller pot on top to keep the pears submerged. Lower the heat, keeping the liquid at a simmer. Cook until the pears are no longer hard and can be easily pierced, generally 3-8 minutes depending on the ripeness of the pears. Do not let them get mushy. Remove from the heat and let them cool in the syrup. Maintain the lid on top because if they are not submerged they will turn brown.

Purée all but 1 or 2 of the poached pears in a food processor with 2 tablespoons of sugar, plus 2 extra tablespoons of Meyer lemon or regular juice. Strain the mixture through a fine sieve, and stir in 2-3 tablespoons of pear liqueur. This can be done several days ahead of making the dessert. Just cover tightly and refrigerate.

To Make the Lady Fingers and Biscuit Layers

Brush two large, heavy baking sheets with melted butter, and lightly dust them with flour. Shake the sheets around to be sure the flour adheres evenly to the butter, then tap the sheets to remove any excess flour.

Take the ring of an 8-inch springform and place it on one corner of one of the prepared sheets, marking a circle in the flour. In the other corner of the same pan, mark a slightly smaller circle with the bottom of the springform.

For the Lady Fingers and Biscuit Layers

6 large room-temperature eggs
¾ cup superfine sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla
1⅓ cups flour
¼ teaspoon cream of tartar
Confectioner's sugar for dusting

For the Syrup

1 cup sugar
½ cup water
2-3 tablespoons pear liqueur

Measure the height of the ring of your springform pan. Then with a ruler and the tip of a knife draw two strips the same height as the springform ring on the second baking sheet.

Place one oven rack at the middle level and another at a higher level. Preheat the oven to 350°.

Separate the eggs in two different bowls. Beat the egg yolks until well combined, then gradually beat in $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the superfine sugar. Beat in the vanilla. Continue to beat until the mixture is very thick and creates a slowly dissolving ribbon when you lift the beater.

Beat the egg whites in the other bowl until frothy, then beat in the cream of tartar. Continue beating while gradually adding the remaining $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the sugar. Continue whipping until the egg whites form very stiff peaks.

Fold $\frac{1}{3}$ of the beaten egg whites into the yolk mixture with a rubber spatula. Place $\frac{1}{3}$ of the flour in a sieve and sift it into the batter, folding it in carefully. Fold in the remaining $\frac{2}{3}$ egg whites and flour, alternately by thirds.

Scoop the batter into a large pastry bag fitted with an approximately $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch plain pastry tube.

First pipe the decorative disc into the larger circle. Starting at the perimeter of the circle, pipe tear-dropped shapes, ending at the center of the circle. Continue piping teardrops until you have covered the entire circle. Finish by piping a 1-inch circular dome over the teardrops at the center of the circle.

Then pipe in the smaller circle a biscuit which will line the bottom of your charlotte mold. Start at the center of the circle, piping a continuous spiral, completely filling the circle. Because this biscuit will be at the bottom, you don't have to worry about appearance.

Sift confectioner's sugar over both biscuits until the batter is white. Place on the center rack of the oven. Splash some cold water on the bottom of the oven, which produces steam, giving the biscuits a pearly finish. Bake about 15-20 minutes, until lightly browned and firm on the outside, but still soft inside.

While the first sheet is baking, pipe two strips of lady fingers about 1-inch wide to match the height that you have drawn in the flour. By piping them adjacent to each other, you will have an easier time molding them to the sides of your springform. Again sift with confectioner's sugar. If the first sheet of biscuits is not yet finished baking, place the ladyfingers on the upper level rack. Again splash with water. Check the time that you place this second sheet in the oven.

When the first sheet of biscuits is fully baked remove it from the oven, then move the sheet of ladyfingers to the center rack to finish the baking. When the sheets come out of the

oven, immediately run a thin spatula carefully under the biscuits and the ladyfingers to loosen them, otherwise they will stick to the pan. Remove all to a rack to cool completely.

These cakes may be made 2-3 days ahead of assembling the dessert. Simply store them carefully in plastic bags or in airtight cookie tins. They may also be frozen in plastic bags for up to 1 month. If frozen, defrost them overnight in the refrigerator before use.

For the Syrup

Combine the sugar and water in a saucepan and bring to a boil, stirring occasionally. Let the syrup cool, then store in an airtight jar, where it will keep for several months. If it crystallizes, add a little water, bring to a boil, and let it cool.

To Make the Mousse

Chill a large bowl and a beater. Combine $\frac{1}{3}$ of the pear purée with the gelatin in a small saucepan, stirring constantly until the gelatin is fully dissolved. Pour into a large bowl.

Stir the remaining pear purée into gelatin-purée mixture, stirring occasionally until it cools.

Meanwhile, whip the cream to soft peaks. Place the gelatin-purée mixture in ice water, and stir just until it begins to thicken. Do not let it set. Fold in the whipped cream. You must then begin assembling immediately.

To Assemble the Charlotte

Place just the ring, not the bottom, of your springform in the center of a serving plate.

Combine 3 tablespoons of the syrup with 3 tablespoons of the pear poaching liquid, and 1-2 tablespoons of pear liqueur. Cut the remaining pear halves into slices, and set aside.

Trim both sides of the ladyfinger strips to match the height of the ring. Brush the backs of the strips with the above liquid. Line the sides of the mold with as much ladyfinger length as you need. Trim the smaller of the biscuits to fit exactly inside the lady fingers, place in the ring upside down, and brush the back of it with above liquid. These steps should be prepared before you make the mousse.

Then fill the mold with half of the pear mousse. Place the sliced pears over the mousse in the ring. Fill the mold with the remaining mousse, and smooth over the top. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for several hours or overnight.

To Serve the Charlotte

Carefully remove the outer ring of the springform. Brush the back of the decorative top biscuit with the syrup and poaching liquid. Remove the plastic wrap from the charlotte and place the decorative disc on top. Chop the chocolate finely, boil the half cup of water and gradually add it to the chocolate, stirring until melted. Stir in the softened butter. Spoon chocolate sauce onto each serving plate, then place slices of the charlotte on top.