

Pumpkin Puffs

I know it sounds as though this recipe has a LOT of steps. You can do much of the preparation in advance however. The custard may be done the day before and refrigerated. Ditto the caramel sauce (and you can always skip that and just dust a little confectioner's sugar on top of your puffs). Even the cream puffs can be made in advance and frozen for a day or two. Refresh them by baking them, lightly covered with foil, at 350 degrees for 10 minutes. If you prefer to purchase frozen cream-puff shells, feel free to do so. The filling is the important part of the recipe.

Ingredients:

for the custard:

1-1/2 cups pumpkin or winter squash puree
1/2 cup white sugar
1/2 cup brown sugar, firmly packed
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon ginger or allspice (or a bit of each)
1 cup evaporated milk
1/2 cup water
2 eggs

for the cream puffs:

1 cup water
1/2 cup (1 stick) sweet butter
1-1/4 cups flour
1/4 teaspoon salt
4 large eggs at room temperature (place them in warm water for a few minutes to achieve the right temperature)

for the optional caramel sauce:

1 cup sugar
1 cup heavy cream
1 teaspoon sea salt or kosher salt
2 teaspoons vanilla

for the filling:

2 cups heavy cream
confectioner's sugar and vanilla to taste (we used about 2 tablespoons sugar—maybe a little more--and 2 teaspoons vanilla)

Instructions:

for the custard:

Make the custard early—ideally the day before—so it will have plenty of time to cool.

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees and grease a 9-inch pie dish. Combine the custard ingredients, and place them in the pie dish. Bake for 10 minutes; then reduce the heat to 350 degrees and bake for another 30 to 40 minutes, or until firm. Allow the custard to cool to room temperature; then cover it and refrigerate it until you are ready to assemble the puffs.

for the optional but good caramel sauce:

In a heavy, wide-bottom pan that holds at least 2 quarts slowly melt the sugar over medium-low heat. You may push the sugar in from the edges with a heavy spoon or heat-resistant spatula, and you may shake the pan over the heat. Try to avoid stirring the sugar, however. Be very careful; melting sugar can be extremely hot.

When the sugar has melted and turned a lovely caramel brown, remove it from the heat and whisk in half of the cream, followed by the other half plus the salt and vanilla. The sauce will bubble furiously.

If for some reason the sauce seizes (that is, the sugar hardens and doesn't get absorbed by the cream), put it back over low heat until the sugar melts. Set the sauce aside. If you are making it in advance, cover and refrigerate it when it gets to room temperature so that it will last until you are ready to use it.

for the puffs:

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Lightly grease two cookie sheets or line them with silicone.

In a medium saucepan bring the water, butter, and salt to a rolling boil. Throw in the flour all at once. Using a wooden spoon stir it in quickly until it becomes smooth and follows the spoon around the pan. Remove the pan from the heat.

Let it rest until it is cool enough so that you can stick your finger in and hold it there for a few seconds (this takes very little time).

Place the dough in a mixer bowl, and beat in the eggs, one at a time, beating vigorously after each egg. Make sure you continue beating for 1 minute after the last egg goes in. The dough will be stiff.

Drop teaspoonsful of dough onto the cookie sheets, leaving enough space between them so the puffs can expand to golf-ball size in the oven.

Bake the puffs until they puff and begin to turn a light golden brown—about 15 minutes.

Remove them from the oven and quickly use a sharp knife to cut a small slit in the side of each puff. (This keeps the puffs from getting soggy.) Return them to the oven for 5 more minutes. If the puffs seem in danger of burning, reduce the temperature to 350 degrees.

Remove the puffs from the oven and cool them on wire racks.

for the filling:

Just before you are ready to assemble your puffs, whip the cream until it is thick and forms nice peaks, adding the sugar and vanilla toward the end of this process.

Use a whisk to break up the pumpkin custard. Gently fold it into the whipped cream.

for assembly:

Carefully cut open each puff in the middle; you will find that each of them has what King Arthur Flour (from whom I slightly adapted the puff recipe) calls a “natural fault line.”

Decorate the bottom of each puff with the pumpkin-cream mixture and replace the top. Drizzle a little caramel sauce on top if desired. (If you prefer a little confectioner’s sugar, go for that.)

This recipe makes about 40 cream puffs. You may make fewer puffs by making them a little bigger—or even more puffs by making them smaller.