

# Food & Wine

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## Parfaits are back — and fancier

By Cheryl Sternman Rule

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The word “parfait” brings to mind an image of Bill Cosby, long spoon in hand, sitting around a table with children. Each one smiles at the elegant tapered glasses filled with layers of rich chocolate pudding and whipped cream.

To my young mind, this striped dessert seemed so fancy, it made no difference that the pudding was instant and the cream non-dairy.

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Fresh and smoked salmon parfait with wild mushrooms

Josiah Slone's hazelnut latte parfait

Ginger peach parfait with cannoli cream

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Parfaits are back in fashion — but the elegant sweet and savory creations on today's restaurant menus bear little resemblance to the parfaits in those long-ago advertisements.

The dish has two very different culinary origins: American and French. American-style parfaits generally contain ice cream (or yogurt) and can be layered with an endless array of ingredients, including fruit, cake, liqueur or syrup. Whole Foods Market in Los Gatos sells a strawberry parfait that layers pastry cream, angel food cake, fresh strawberries and whipped cream. This is clearly an American-style dessert, with a lidded plastic container standing in for the tapered glass.

Joan Shedlovsky of Kraft Foods, the makers of Jell-O, says, “The earliest print ad for Jell-O pudding that featured a parfait recipe appeared in 1942.” The recipe, for chocolate peppermint parfait, called for chocolate pudding, whipped cream and peppermint extract. It also encouraged cooks to tint the dessert “a delicate green.” By no means haute cuisine, these parfaits were intentionally homey. In fact, the ad's slogan was: “Like Grandma's — only more so!”

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Today's chefs, particularly those at upscale restaurants, are not evoking images of apron-clad grandmothers with their parfaits. Rather, they adhere to the desert's French origins. (Incidentally, *parfait* translates as “perfect.”) French-style parfaits use flavored custard bases chilled in terrine molds (rather than in ice cream makers, which incorporate too much air)

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KRAFT

A 1942 Jell-O ad gives directions for a parfait made by layering chocolate pudding with peppermint-flavored whipped cream.

# PARFAIT | Sweet and savory treats are not like Grandma's

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and often are presented unmolded on a plate rather than in a tall glass. The result, both in flavor and appearance, differs dramatically from its American counterpart.

According to Brigitte Benquet, co-owner of Brigitte's Restaurant in Santa Clara, traditional French parfaits were coffee-flavored and chilled in conical or cylindrical molds. Now they can be flavored any number of ways, but the technique is still the same: Begin with a hot sugar-syrup and egg yolks; beat until cool; incorporate flavorings like seasonal fruit purees, li-

queurs or chocolate; and then fold in softly whipped heavy cream. Pour the lightened custard into a mold to set up in the freezer, then unmold and slice into portions. Parfaits "are very airy," says Benquet, who is Parisian, "and are convenient to make at home because they don't require an ice cream maker." But, she warns, "they do require delicacy and patience."

Nicole Krasinski, pastry chef at Rubicon in San Francisco, has served, among others, a triple vanilla bean parfait, a Meyer lemon parfait and a stone-fruit parfait. Only the latter is served frozen; the other two are frozen only until



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French-style parfaits are served unmolded on a plate, while American-style parfaits come in a tall glass.

they are firm enough to cut into interesting shapes. Krasinski often places her parfaits atop elegant cookies for textural contrast and serves them with a sauce alongside.

Josiah Slone, chef and co-owner of Restaurant Sent Sovi in Saratoga, served a hazelnut latte parfait earlier this year. He favors the traditional custard preparation as well, but his version is flavored with espresso and candied hazelnuts and is served with chocolate mousse.

"Parfaits should be frozen," he says, "but because of their fat and sugar content, they don't freeze like ice cream."

In other words, they are lighter and softer than traditional ice cream. Slone began making parfaits when he was a chef in Jamaica, where he didn't have access to high-quality ice cream or an ice cream freezer.

Executive Chef Howard Bulka of Marche in Menlo Park says his triple chocolate parfait with strawberry coulis is one of the restaurant's most popular desserts. Bulka pairs a different flavoring with each

of the three chocolates in the parfait: The white chocolate layer is flavored with lemon juice, the milk chocolate with Bailey's Irish Cream and the dark chocolate with Kahlúa. To make the dessert, each layer is poured into a terrine mold and frozen before the next layer is added. The final product is then sliced and served with strawberry coulis.

Must parfaits be sweet? Not according to Swiss-born chef Émile Mooser of Émile's in San Jose or sous chef Gregory Clausen of Silks in San Francisco. Mooser has served a *fois gras* parfait with a dried fruit compote, port reduction and brioche toast. And the fresh and smoked salmon parfait with wild mushrooms served at Silks was flavored with fresh herbs and hot chile oil and served with a balsamic vinegar glaze.

Parfaits belong to the same family of custard-based dish-

es as the *bombe*, *nougat glacé*, frozen soufflé and even the Italian *semifreddo*. A *bombe*, Benquet says, generally includes two or more flavors, whereas a parfait usually features a single dominant flavor. A *bombe* is spherical, "like an igloo," says Benquet, and cutting into one reveals contrasting colors echoing the two flavors. A *nougat glacé* incorporates chopped nuts for a chewier texture. A frozen soufflé uses separately beaten egg whites in addition to the yolks and often is served in a ramekin. A *semifreddo* can be any chilled or partially frozen dessert that often incorporates whipped cream or meringue.

These definitions are fluid, and one chef's parfait could easily be another's frozen soufflé.

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The cannoli cream and crushed amaretti lend this rich, layered parfait a distinctly Italian flair. I like to serve it in 8-ounce champagne flutes, but any clear glasses will do. (You may want to double the recipe if using larger glasses, but this dessert is quite rich.)

### Ginger peach parfait with cannoli cream

Serves 4

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| 4 large, ripe peaches, peeled (if desired) and diced (about 4 cups) | 1/2 cup mascarpone cheese (see Note)                        |
| 1 tablespoon lemon juice  | 2/3 cup ricotta cheese                                      |
| <b>For ginger syrup:</b>  | 2 teaspoons sugar   |
| 5 tablespoons sugar   | 2 teaspoons milk  |
| 2/3 cup water   | 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract                                |
| 3 tablespoons minced ginger root                                    | 8 amaretti cookies, crushed                                 |
|   | 1 ounce crystallized ginger, finely chopped (about 1/4 cup) |

In a medium bowl, toss peaches with lemon juice. Place in the refrigerator while making the ginger syrup.

**To make ginger syrup:** Bring 5 tablespoons sugar, water and ginger to boil in small saucepan, stirring constantly. Remove from heat. Cover and allow to steep for 20 minutes. Pour through fine sieve into glass measuring cup, pressing on solids to extract as much liquid as possible. Allow to cool slightly. (Ginger syrup can be made ahead and stored in a covered glass jar for several days in refrigerator.) Pour syrup over peaches. Toss to coat and return to refrigerator for at least 1 hour or up to 3 hours.

**To make cannoli cream:** In the bowl of an electric mixer (or by hand, using a wooden spoon), beat together mascarpone, ricotta, 2 teaspoons sugar, milk and vanilla until very well blended, about 2 minutes.

**To assemble:** Drain peaches. (Syrup can be reserved, if desired, to flavor lemonade or iced tea.)

Fill each glass with the following layers: 3 tablespoons ginger peaches, 2 tablespoons cannoli cream, 1 tablespoon amaretti, 1 teaspoon crystallized ginger, 3 tablespoons peaches, 2 tablespoons cannoli cream and top with 2 teaspoons crystallized ginger. Serve immediately or keep refrigerated for up to 1 hour.

**Note:** Mascarpone, an Italian cream cheese, can be found in the dairy section of many supermarkets.

Cheryl Sternman Rule

Using a plastic ring mold to layer the ingredients will improve the appearance of the parfait.

### Fresh and smoked salmon parfait with wild mushrooms

Serves 4

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| 8 ounces fresh wild salmon, cut in small dice (see Notes) | 2 tablespoons parsley, chopped fine                        |
| 2 tablespoons chives, chopped fine                        | Olive oil  |
| 1 tablespoon hot chile oil                                | 2 tablespoons sake   |
| 2 ounces candied yuzu lemon rind, diced fine (see Notes)  | 8 ounces smoked salmon, cut in small dice                  |
| 1 teaspoon sea salt                                       | 4 slices brioche, 2 inches wide by 1/2-inch thick, toasted |
| Freshly cracked pepper                                    | <b>For garnish:</b>  |
| 8 ounces assorted wild mushrooms                          | Balsamic vinegar glaze (see Notes)                         |
| 2 tablespoons shallot, chopped fine                       | A few leaves mâche lettuce (or another baby lettuce)       |

In a bowl, mix the fresh salmon, chives, chile oil, yuzu rind, salt and fresh cracked pepper to taste.

Saute the mushrooms with the shallots and parsley in a little olive oil. Deglaze the pan with sake, stirring to dissolve any brown bits from the bottom of the pan. Cook till slightly dry.

Carefully place a small scoop of the smoked salmon on top of each slice of brioche toast. Add some of the mushrooms on top of the smoked salmon. Next add the fresh salmon on top of the mushrooms. Drizzle some balsamic glaze around the plate. Sprinkle a little mâche on top of each parfait.

**Notes:** The fresh salmon in this recipe is eaten raw, so purchase sushi-quality fish. Look for candied yuzu lemon rind in Japanese markets. Alternately, substitute another type of candied citrus rind or freshly grated lemon zest. To make balsamic vinegar glaze, reduce 1/2 cup balsamic vinegar in a small skillet over medium-high heat until syrupy.

Silks Restaurant in the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in San Francisco

### Josiah Slone's hazelnut latte parfait

Serves 6

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| <b>For parfait:</b>                          | 1 1/4 cups cream   |
| 1 1/2 cups cream                             | 8 ounces dark chocolate, chopped   |
| 9 egg yolks                                  | 1 shot brewed espresso   |
| 1 cup simple syrup (see Notes)               | 1 tablespoon vanilla extract   |
| 1 shot brewed espresso (about 1 1/2 ounces)  | 6 tablespoons (3 ounces) soft butter   |
| 1/2 cup candied or toasted hazelnuts, ground | <b>For garnish:</b>  |
| <b>For mousse:</b>                           | Chopped candied or toasted hazelnuts, warm chocolate sauce and whipped cream |
| 3 eggs                                       |  |
| 1/4 cup powdered sugar                       |  |

**To prepare parfait:** Line 6-cup terrine mold with plastic wrap. Whip cream to medium peaks. Set aside. Combine egg yolks and simple syrup in the top of a double boiler over simmering water. Beat continuously, until thick ribbons form. Remove from heat and set top part of double boiler into a bowl of ice. Beat mixture until cool. Add espresso. Carefully fold in whipped cream and hazelnuts. Pour into mold, fold plastic over it, and freeze overnight.

**To prepare mousse:** Separate eggs. Whip whites to medium peaks, adding powdered sugar at the soft peak stage. Set aside. Whip cream to medium peaks, reserve. In top of double boiler over simmering water, melt chocolate with espresso and vanilla. While it is still warm, incorporate butter, and then egg yolks. Scrape chocolate mixture into a large bowl. Fold in half the egg whites to lighten. Carefully fold in remaining egg whites and whipped cream. Chill until set, approximately 4 hours.

**To assemble:** To remove parfait from mold, grab edges of plastic wrap and pop it out. If it sticks, turn it over. Cut 12 slices of the parfait. Arrange two slices in a small bowl with a layer of mousse sandwiched in between. Garnish with candied hazelnuts, warm chocolate sauce and whipped cream. Serve immediately.

**Notes:** Make simple syrup by combining 3 parts sugar and 2 parts water in a saucepan. Bring to a boil, then let cool.