



Anise Panna Cotta with Spiced Rhubarb

Mesmerized by the new Jell-O "wiggle" (yes, it's wiggle not jiggle) commercials, we were inspired to create a dessert of our own with a sexy wiggle. Immediately a panna cotta - a dessert that gracefully dances on the plate - came to mind. Consisting of little more than cream, milk, sugar and gelatin, panna cotta translated from Italian literally means "cooked cream." Laced with anise seed, this light, silky custard provides an elegantly creamy accompaniment to the spice-poached rhubarb. The star anise in the rhubarb pairs delightfully with and enhances the flavor of the anise seed in the panna cotta. Rich yet delicate, this dessert is a cream lover's paradise.

6 servings

Ingredients

For the panna cotta:

1 package unflavored gelatin
2 tablespoons cold water
1 ½ cups heavy cream
1 ½ cups whole milk
1/3 cup sugar
1 tablespoon honey
1 ½ teaspoons anise seed
A pinch of salt

For the poached rhubarb and spiced syrup:

3-4 stalks rhubarb (about 1 pound)
1 ½ cups sugar, separated
4 star anise
2 teaspoons candied ginger, finely chopped
1 teaspoon pink peppercorns, crushed
2 whole cloves
½ tsp grated orange zest
2 cups water
1 drop red food coloring

For the candied star anise:

The reduced syrup from the rhubarb
At least 6 star anises
Granulated sugar for sprinkling

[Chef's Note: You can use 4 star anise from the poaching liquid plus 2 extra, or as many as you desire as garnishes for the plates.]

Equipment

Fine mesh sieve
Large liquid measuring cup
6 attractive ramekins or small bowls for molding the panna cotta

Preparation

Prepare the panna cotta:

Place six 3½-ounce ramekins (3" in diameter, 1½ inches deep) on a rimmed baking sheet. In a medium saucepan, whisk together the cream, milk, sugar, honey and anise seed and bring to a simmer over medium-low heat until bubbles form at the edges of the pan. Remove from the heat and let

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sit for 10 minutes to infuse and develop the anise flavor. Place the two tablespoons of cold water in a small bowl, sprinkle with the gelatin and let stand until the gelatin has softened, about 3 minutes.

Add the gelatin to the cream mixture, whisking until dissolved. Strain the entire mixture through a fine mesh sieve into a large measuring cup with a pouring spout. Pour the mixture into 6 nicely shaped ramekins, glasses or bowls, cover and chill in the refrigerator until set, at least 4 hours but preferably overnight.

Prepare the rhubarb and spiced syrup:

Trim the stalks of rhubarb, making sure to remove all of the leaves and ends from the stalk as they are poisonous. Wash the rhubarb and cut into 3 inch long pieces and halve lengthwise if thick.

Place ½ cup of the sugar, the star anise, ginger, pink peppercorns, cloves and zest in a medium bowl. Toss with the rhubarb strips and macerate for 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Place the rest of the sugar, water and food coloring in a wide, non-reactive pan, and bring to a boil over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally to dissolve the sugar. Reduce the heat and add the macerated rhubarb pieces and all of the sugar/spice mixture. Simmer gently until the rhubarb is just tender but still holds its shape, about 5 minutes. Transfer to a flat dish and allow rhubarb to cool.

[Chef's Note: The rhubarb will continue to cook after it is removed from the sugar syrup, so do not overcook during the poaching stage.]

Bring the poaching liquid back up to a boil over medium-high heat and simmer, reducing the liquid to a beautiful pink syrup which will almost look like a light pink caramel, about 40 minutes. (See Candied Star Anise preparation at this point). Pour the syrup through a fine mesh sieve into a small bowl and allow to cool slightly.

For the candied star anise:

Place the extra star anise you want to candy into the pot with the reducing syrup during final few minutes of boiling. Do not continue to boil the syrup for much longer once you have added the extra star anise, as it will affect the flavor of the sauce. Once you strain the liquid, reserve all of the star anise. Place separated on a drying rack and sprinkle with granulated sugar. Let sit overnight until dry.

[Chef's Notes: Don't skip the straining step (in both the panna cotta and sauce recipe) as it removes any bits of undissolved gelatin or spices and insures a nice smooth dessert. Also, don't let the cream mixture cool too much before straining or it will start to gel and become too difficult to pass through the sieve.

If you prefer not to unmold the panna cottas, feel free to serve the dessert directly in the glasses/bowls. We are partial to using martini glasses or parfait glasses.

More good news is the fact that this is an extremely simple dessert to prepare in advance. All of the ingredients will last well for several days once each component is made. Better yet, the flavors will be more complex if the rhubarb and sauce are made several days ahead and given a day of rest in the refrigerator.

This recipe produces extra sauce (as the rhubarb needs to be completely covered when cooked), so rather than waste the delicious syrup, we suggest making a delicately spiced lemonade, mixing it with freshly squeezed lemon juice and water.]

Service

Remove panna cotta from refrigerator. If unmolding, dip the bottoms of the ramekins or bowls into a warm water bath for about 10 seconds (any longer than that and they will turn to mush). Carefully, turn out the panna cotta onto serving plates. Stack several slices of rhubarb in a neatly latticed pile diagonally from the panna cotta. Garnish the plate and the rhubarb with the spiced syrup, preferably keeping the panna cotta naked. Admire the sexy wobble as you bring the finished dessert to the table, and enjoy!