

SOUFFLES

For some reason soufflés seem to intimidate many cooks and they really shouldn't. For me they are "Grandma food". I can remember my Grandmother, who I spent my early years with, making them often usually for what we called "supper". On the ranch in the mountains of Colorado where we lived, supper, the evening meal, was usually lighter and quicker than the main meal of the day, which we ate at lunchtime. In many respects soufflés are also "farm foods" in the sense that they are made from very basic and generally available ingredients on every farm: eggs, butter, milk, flour and a little cheese, to which you can add whatever else may be on hand.

The name *soufflé* comes from the French verb *souffler* and roughly translates "to breathe", "to whisper" or "to blow up". This aptly describes the delicate, fragile, ethereal texture that seems to disappear in your mouth as you eat it. Contrary to popular belief, that delicate result can be achieved without anything much in the way of talent or expertise - - I promise!! For our exploration here I am focusing on warm, oven-baked soufflés, i.e., those straight out of the oven. The term soufflé is also applied to cold, sweet preparations in which the airy texture is achieved by gelatin or whipped cream or both. To purists these are more accurately described as mousses.

Soufflés are pretty simple. They are made up of two components: A base that is usually a thick milk based white sauce (what the French call *béchamel*) and whipped egg whites. The latter are folded in just before the mixture is baked in the oven and are what give soufflés their unique texture. In the oven, the air trapped in the egg whites expands as it heats causing the whole mixture to rise. The base is the flavor carrier, the whites provide the puff. I'll just betcha that once you've made a couple of these, they'll become a regular part of your repertoire! A couple of other notes.

- You can prepare souffles ahead! Most soufflés can be prepared ahead, in their uncooked state for up to **an hour**. Cover with an upturned bowl. You can also freeze them, wrapped in plastic in the baking dish for up to 2 weeks and then bake them straight from the freezer (be sure to remove the plastic wrap first). You'll have to double the baking time listed. They rise almost as much as the freshly made.
- Souffles can be cooked ahead and reheated! Known as twice-cooked soufflés, these are usually baked in individual serving sizes, cooled, taken out of their dish and then at serving time reheated with a splash of cream. More pudding-like they do puff again and are a delicious variation. See recipe for my twice-baked goat cheese soufflés below.

- Souffles can be baked flat and rolled with fillings and also baked “free form”.



BASIC CHEESE SOUFFLE

Serves 4 – 6

This is the one to get started with because it brings together all of the individual techniques for putting a soufflé together. Traditionally the soufflé is baked in a straight-sided dish that the French call a *charlotte*. They are nifty looking, usually white with fluted sides and are widely available in cookware stores. Even if you’ve never made a soufflé, there’s a good chance you own the right dish. You can however use any ovenproof dish that is straight sided, at least 4 inches deep with a capacity of 6 cups or so.

4 tablespoons unsalted butter
2 tablespoons finely and freshly grated parmesan or asiago
3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
1 cup plus 1 tablespoon warm whole milk
1/4 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
3/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon freshly grated pepper, preferably white
4 large egg yolks

6 large egg whites
Big pinch cream of tartar, optional
2 tablespoons finely chopped chives (optional)
1 cup finely grated Gruyere, Cheddar or other melting cheese of your choice

Preparing the Dish

With your fingers lightly rub a tablespoon or so of the butter all around the inside of the dish. Sprinkle the parmesan inside the dish and roll the dish around in your hands to lightly coat and knock out extra parmesan. Set the dish aside in the refrigerator to chill a bit. A chilled dish seems to keep the butter in suspension better as the soufflé bakes.

Preparing the sauce base or “Roux”

This is basic white sauce. In a saucepan melt the remaining butter, add the flour and stir over moderate heat for 2 – 3 minutes without browning. *This step cooks the flour so that it doesn't have a raw “floury” taste.* Slowly whisk in the warm milk and bring to a boil, stirring all the time, for about 3 minutes. The sauce will be very thick and smooth. Stir in the nutmeg, salt and pepper and take off the heat. Whisk a little of the warm base slowly into the egg yolks. This tempers or gradually warms them so that they are less likely to scramble. Beat this mixture back into the rest of the base and set aside.

Preparing the Egg Whites

In a clean bowl with a hand or stand mixer beat the egg whites and cream of tartar just until stiff but still shiny and moist looking (*see note following on improving the stability of egg whites*).

Finishing the Soufflé

Sprinkle chives over the top of the sauce base and with a spatula, stir a quarter of the whipped egg whites into the base. Do this quickly. This lightens the mixture so that you can fold in the remaining whites. Scoop the rest of the whites on top and with the spatula cut into the whites, drag it along the bottom and bring the sauce mixture over the top. Turn the bowl a quarter of a turn, sprinkle on some of the grated Gruyere and repeat until the whites, cheese and the sauce are just combined. *What should be going through your mind is that you are doing everything you can to keep as much air as you can in the whites without deflating them!*

Spoon the mixture into the prepared dish, gently smoothing the top (*see note below on creating a “top-hat”*) and place the soufflé in a preheated 400° oven and bake for 25 – 30 minutes or until the soufflé is puffed and golden brown. * *If your oven doesn't have a glass window and you're tempted to peek, don't! Keep the door closed for at least the first 20 minutes so that the soufflé can set!* When done, serve immediately. To maintain as much of the puff as possible when serving, plunge an upright serving spoon and fork straight down into the center of the soufflé and then pull crust apart and scoop out a serving.

Other Variations on the Basic Cheese Soufflé

- Spinach or Broccoli: Stir 1/2 cup cooked and finely chopped spinach or broccoli (starting with frozen makes it easier, be sure to squeeze dry) into the warm sauce base after the addition of the egg yolks.
- Shrimp, Crab, Salmon (cold or hot smoked): Sauté 3 tablespoons finely chopped shallots or green onion in a little butter or olive oil till soft. Add 3 tablespoons white wine and continue to cook till wine is evaporated. Off heat, add 1/2 - 1 cup finely chopped or diced fish and stir into warm sauce base after the addition of the egg yolks. Reduce grated Gruyere to 1/3 cup.
- Mushroom: Stir 3/4 cup of very finely minced and butter-sauteed portabella mushrooms into the base before the egg whites are added. Reduce Gruyere to 1/2 cup.
- Soufflé on a Platter: You don't have to bake a soufflé in a dish. Like the rolled soufflé (see recipe following) you can bake any soufflé on an ovenproof platter. One of my favorite dishes for company is to take the basic cheese soufflé mixture above and mound it over fresh asparagus that has been cooked briefly but still crisp. Sprinkle on a little cheese and bake for 15 – 18 minutes in a preheated 425-degree oven or until the soufflé is puffed and brown. Serve it immediately. You can do the same thing with other vegetables like endives or cooked artichoke hearts. Experiment too with fish like salmon. Depending on thickness you'll want to cook it just a little before mounding the soufflé mixture on top.
- Individual Soufflés: All soufflés can also be made prepared in individual small ramekins. Cooking time will be 18 – 20 minutes or so depending on the mixture.



ROQUEFORT SOUFFLÉS

Serves 4

The earthy flavor of Roquefort or blue cheese makes for a wonderful Soufflés. This is my favorite of all of the cheese possibilities.

2 tablespoons unsalted butter, plus softened butter for the ramekins

1/2 cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

3 tablespoons all-purpose flour

1 cup milk

Pinch of salt

Pinch of cayenne pepper

2 ounces Roquefort cheese

5 large eggs, separated

2 tablespoons snipped chives

Preheat the oven to 375°. Butter four 1-cup ramekins and coat each one with a couple of teaspoons of grated Parmigiano.

In a medium saucepan, melt the 2 tablespoons of butter. Add the flour and cook over moderate heat for 1 minute, whisking constantly. Add the milk, salt and cayenne and cook, whisking, until very thick and bubbling, about 2 minutes. Scrape the mixture into a large bowl and whisk in the Roquefort and the remaining grated Parmigiano. Whisk in the egg yolks and chives.

In another bowl, using an electric mixer, beat the egg whites until firm peaks form. Fold the beaten whites into the cheese mixture until no streaks remain. Pour the mixture into the ramekins, filling them three-fourths of the way; set the ramekins on a baking sheet. Bake the soufflés for about 20 minutes, until puffed and golden. Place the soufflés on plates and serve immediately.

TWICE BAKED GOAT CHEESE SOUFFLÉS

Serves 6

The technique of twice baking is a little different in that you first bake the soufflés in a water bath. The texture of these is more “pudding-like” than the Basic Cheese Soufflé.

Twice Baked Soufflés (recipe follows)

1 bunch young Upland watercress (woody stems discarded)

1 teaspoon finely grated lemon zest

For the Soufflés:

5 tablespoons butter

4 tablespoons flour

1 1/2 cups warm milk

4 ounces fresh soft goat cheese

1 tablespoon freshly grated Parmesan cheese

2 tablespoons mixed chopped fresh herbs such as parsley, chives and tarragon

3 egg yolks

4 egg whites

Salt and freshly ground pepper

2 cups light cream

Using 1-tablespoon butter, lightly coat the inside of 6 one-half cup soufflé dishes and chill. Add remaining butter to saucepan, stir in flour and cook over moderate heat for 2 to 3 minutes. Gradually stir in milk and bring just to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 3 to 4 minutes, stirring regularly.

Mash goat cheese and add to hot mixture along with Parmesan and herbs. Stir till smooth and remove from heat. Cool for a few minutes and then stir in egg yolks. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Separately beat egg whites to stiff peaks and fold quickly into cheese mixture. Divide between buttered dishes and smooth surface. Place dishes in a larger baking pan and pour in boiling water to come two-thirds up the sides of the dish. Bake in a preheated 360-degree oven for 20 minutes or until soufflés are firm to the touch and well puffed. Remove from oven and pan and cool slightly.

With your fingers, gently ease them out of dishes and place in a lightly buttered ovenproof dish so that they are not touching and just large enough to hold them. Cover loosely with plastic until ready to serve.

To serve, preheat oven again to 375 degrees. Remove plastic and pour light cream over to moisten soufflés well. Bake in oven for 15 minutes or until soufflés have swelled and are golden brown.

Arrange watercress attractively on plates. Place a warm soufflé in the middle. Pour reheated warm cream around and sprinkle lemon zest overall. Serve immediately.



CHEESE GRITS SOUFFLÉS

Serve 6 to 8

One of the hallmarks of Southern cooking is grits - - ground dent corn whose most famous accompaniment is red eye gravy made from ham fat and coffee. Some also swear with the addition of a little coca cola to the gravy. Here they're woven into a soufflé. Use old-fashioned stone ground grits. They take a bit longer to cook but the flavor is better than the so-called instant or quick-cooking varieties. I love the grits from Hoppin' John's in Charleston, SC www.hoppinjohns.com or Weisenberger's in Hardin County, KY, both available online.

2 tablespoons butter
2 tablespoons freshly grated parmesan cheese
1 cup water
2 cups chicken or vegetable stock
1 cup light cream (half and half)
1 cup grits, preferably stone ground
6 large eggs, separated

1-1/2 cups grated Cheddar, Fontina or Gruyere Cheese
3 tablespoons poached or roasted garlic finely minced or mashed
3 tablespoons chopped chives
Salt and freshly ground pepper
Drops of hot sauce to taste

Butter a 2-quart soufflé or straight-sided baking dish and lightly coat with the parmesan, turning the dish. Chill in the refrigerator.

Add the water, stock and light cream to a deep saucepan and bring to a boil. Stir in the grits, reduce heat and stir regularly until the mixture is smooth, creamy and thick, about 15 minutes. Stone ground grits can take as much as 15 minutes longer. Take a taste to make sure they are cooked through.

In a separate bowl beat the egg yolks and then slowly beat in a little of the grits mixture to warm and temper the yolks. Stir in the rest of the grits along with the cheese, garlic, chives and slightly over season with salt, pepper and drops of hot sauce. You can set this mixture aside covered and at room temperature for up to 2 hours before proceeding.

In a separate bowl, beat the egg whites until stiff. Stir 1/4 of the whites into the grits mixture to lighten it and then fold in the remaining grits and spoon into the chilled soufflé dish. Bake in a preheated 375° oven for 35 to 40 minutes or until mixture is set, puffed and golden brown. Serve immediately.

ROLLED SOUFFLE WITH RICOTTA, PEPPERS, ONIONS AND GREENS

Serves 8 - 10

This is a very pretty and good one for entertaining, especially if you have vegetarian friends. It can be prepared a couple of hours ahead and then reheated as indicated below. It shows the versatility of a souffle. Serve it with a little tomato base pasta sauce (homemade or store bought). You can of course fill the soufflé with almost anything you desire or have on hand.

For the filling:

4 tablespoons olive oil
3 cups diced red onion
1 tablespoon chopped garlic
1-1/2 cups each seeded and diced red and yellow pepper

3 quarts chopped young savory greens such as chard, kale, spinach or a combination
any tough center stems discarded
2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil
2 teaspoons chopped fresh tarragon
Salt and freshly ground pepper
1-pound good quality whole milk ricotta
2 cups freshly grated parmesan, grana or asiago cheese

Heat half the olive oil in a large skillet and sauté the onions, garlic and peppers until softened and just beginning to color. Remove and set aside. Add the remaining oil and sauté the greens until just tender. Cool and gently squeeze to remove excess moisture. Combine greens with the onion mixture and herbs and season to taste with salt and pepper. Set it aside. In a separate bowl combine the ricotta with the Parmesan and season to taste with salt and pepper. Set this aside also.

For the Soufflé Layer

6 large eggs plus 2 additional egg whites
1-3/4 cups half and half, warmed
4 tablespoons butter plus extra for the baking sheet
6 tablespoons flour
1 1/2 teaspoons salt
1 teaspoon freshly ground pepper, white preferred
1/2 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
1/2 cup freshly grated Dry Jack or Parmesan cheese

Line a 10"x15" baking sheet with parchment. Lightly butter the parchment and set aside. Separate the eggs. Lightly beat the yolks and set aside. In a separate pan melt the butter, stir in the flour and continue to stir over moderate heat for 2 - 3 minutes without browning. Whisk in half and half and stirring constantly cook for another 3 - 4 minutes or until sauce base is very thick. Remove from heat and stir in salt, pepper and nutmeg. Whisk a little of the warm base mixture into the egg yolks to temper them. Then whisk this mixture into the remaining milk mixture and set aside.

Beat egg whites until they form stiff peaks. Quickly stir a quarter of the beaten whites into the egg yolk mixture to lighten it. Using the method described in the Basic Cheese soufflé, fold in the rest of the egg whites.

Gently spread the soufflé mixture onto the prepared sheet pan and sprinkle cheese evenly over the top. Bake in a preheated 400-degree for 15 minutes until top is browned and puffed. Remove from the oven and cool. Soufflé is now ready to fill and roll.

To assemble and serve the rolled soufflé: Spread the ricotta mixture evenly over the soufflé layer. Then spread the greens mixture over this. Starting with the long edge, carefully roll the soufflé jellyroll style using the parchment to help the process. You can slice and serve it now or set aside loosely covered with foil for an hour or two. Place in a preheated 400-degree oven for 10 – 15 minutes to heat through then slice thickly and place on warm plates. Serve with a little sauce of your choice such as the roasted red pepper sauce on *page xxx* or the uncooked tomato sauce on *page xxx*.

CHOCOLATE SOUFFLÉS

Serves 6 in individual molds or one 1-1/2-quart dish

Something sweet, this soufflé is a little denser than traditional versions. Its great attribute however is that it can be made ahead and held in the refrigerator for up to a day before baking. Allow a little longer baking time if you are taking it straight from the refrigerator.

3 tablespoons unsalted butter
1/4 cup plus 1 tablespoon sugar
5 ounces finely chopped bittersweet chocolate
3 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 tablespoon flour
1/3 cup milk
4 eggs, separated
1 teaspoon vanilla
2 teaspoons finely grated orange zest
1/8 teaspoon cream of tartar

Garnish: Powdered sugar and a fresh puree of strained, lightly sweetened raspberries or blackberries if desired.

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. With 1 tablespoon of butter lightly coat the insides of six individual soufflé dishes (4 – 6 ounces) and sprinkle with 1 tablespoon granulated sugar turning dishes to coat evenly. Set in refrigerator to chill dishes while making the soufflé mixture.

Place chocolate in a double boiler and melt, stirring occasionally. *(Alternately you can melt it in the microwave. Place chocolate in a glass bowl and heat for 1 minute at half power. If necessary, give it 10-second doses at half power until just beginning to melt).*

In a separate saucepan, melt the remaining 2 tablespoons butter, add flour, cook and stir over low heat for about 2 minutes. Add milk and whisk until mixture is smooth and lightly thickened. Continue to cook for about 3 minutes until mixture thickens nicely. Off heat, gently stir in the egg yolks one at a time to temper them. Stir in the melted chocolate, vanilla, and zest until thoroughly combined. Set aside and cool to room temperature.

In a separate bowl, beat egg whites with cream of tartar until soft peaks form. Sprinkle the remaining 1/4 cup sugar in gradually and continue to beat until whites are stiff but not dry. Stir 1/4 of the whites into chocolate mixture to lighten it and then carefully fold in remaining whites. Pour mixture into prepared soufflé dishes and place on a baking sheet.

Bake for 12 - 14 minutes or until a wooden skewer tests moist but not gooey. Soufflés will puff and crack before they are done. One large soufflé will take 30 - 35 minutes.

Remove from oven, dust with powdered sugar and garnish with a spoonful or two of fresh berry puree.



STRAWBERRY SOUFFLÉS

Serves 2 to 3

This is a simple souffle that can use any berry. Perfect as a treat for you and that special someone! Recipe doubles easily.

2 teaspoons or so softened butter for the ramekins
5 tablespoons sugar plus more for coating the ramekins
6 ounces fresh strawberries, stemmed and thickly sliced
1-1/2 teaspoons cornstarch
Salt
3 egg whites at room temperature
1/8 teaspoon cream of tartar
Powdered sugar for garnish

Butter the bottoms and sides of two or three 1-cup ramekins. Dust with sugar. Combine the berries, 2 tablespoons sugar, cornstarch, and a pinch of salt in a food processor and pulse 4 or 5 times until the berries are finely chopped. Scrape them into a small saucepan and over medium heat, cook stirring constantly with a heat proof spatula until thick,

about 3 minutes. Take pan off heat and cool berry mixture completely. This can be done ahead.

Adjust oven rack to the lower third of the oven and preheat to 400°

Beat the egg whites with a stand mixer until frothy, about 1 minute. Add cream of tartar and beat until soft peaks form. Add the remaining 3 tablespoons of sugar, 1 tablespoon at a time. Increase speed to medium high and beat until the whites are stiff and shiny but not dry, 1 to 2 minutes more.

Gently fold the cooled, cooked strawberry puree into the whites until no white streaks remain. Divide among the prepared ramekins filling to the rims. Smooth tops with a spatula and form a “hat” in each by running a thumb around the inside edge of ramekin. (Can be prepared up to 2 hours ahead and refrigerated). Place on a baking sheet and bake until soufflés have puffed about 2 inches above the rims and a wooden skewer inserted in the center comes out clean but moist, about 10 – 12 minutes. Serve immediately dusted with powdered sugar.

A couple of final notes:

Improving the Stability of egg whites: Traditionally the French called for beating egg whites in a copper bowl to improve stability and texture of the beaten whites. Although there are many theories about what’s at work here but it really does work! Either the acid in the copper or the ions of the metal or both, work to improve the texture and stability of beaten egg whites. Unfortunately, copper bowls are expensive (and also a pain to keep bright and clean) so the next best alternative is either to use a pinch of cream of tartar (tartaric acid) in the whites or to pour in a couple of teaspoons of white vinegar into the mixing bowl and then wipe it out with a paper towel. The trace of vinegar (acetic acid) that remains also seems to help stabilize the whites. Also, it’s imperative that the whites are absolutely free of any fat. Even a tiny speck of the yolk will cause the whites to be less stable and they won’t whip up nearly as much. A final note - - eggs are easier to separate when cold. However, for maximum puff and volume the whites should be allowed to return to room temperature before whipping.

Creating a “Top Hat”: This is very easily done and a classic French technique. All you do is to level the top of the soufflé even with the rim of the dish. With your thumb press into the soufflé mixture about ¼ of an inch or so and follow around the rim. When the soufflé bakes the center will rise a bit higher creating a top hat effect. Another technique that yields a similar effect is to place the soufflé in a preheated 425-degree oven and then immediately turn it down to 375 degrees. You’ll get a “mushroom” effect.

Attaching Collars to soufflés: Many recipes call for attaching a parchment or foil collar around the outside of the baking dish before adding the batter. This enables the soufflé to rise even higher in the dish and makes for a dramatic presentation when the collar is removed at serving time. I've never particularly liked this because the collar can slip during baking and unfortunately can sometimes be a bit of a pain to remove at serving time. Who needs it?!!

Freezing Egg Yolks and Whites: One of the regular questions I get is "*What do I do with the egg yolks if I haven't used them all in the soufflé?*" Well, you can freeze egg yolks but they must have a little salt or sugar beaten into them before freezing. If you don't, yolks frozen alone become very gelatinous and are almost impossible to use. To make them usable, add either 1/8-teaspoon salt or 1/2-teaspoon sugar or corn syrup to the yolks before they're frozen. Obviously, which you add will depend on how you think you'll use them later on. Be sure to label the container so you know and you can freeze them for up to 2 months. For egg whites - - they're much easier. Just stick them in a well-sealed container and they last in the freezer for up to 4 months.

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