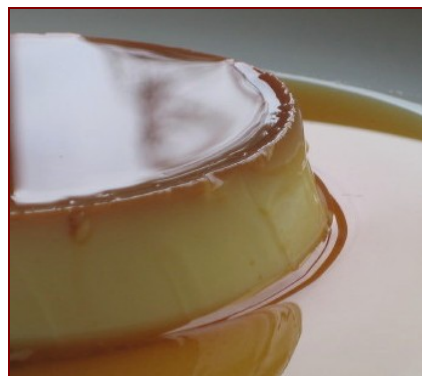


Classic crème caramel

Serves: 4

Preparation time: 30 mins

Cooking time: c.40 mins at 150 C (300 F)



Ingredients:

8oz (1 cup) sugar, divided into two halves

tiny squirt lemon juice if you have it handy

1 UK pint (2½ cups) whole milk (or use half milk, half cream)

1 vanilla bean (or 1 tsp vanilla extract)

3 eggs

3 egg yolks (or 4 for a really rich result)

pinch salt

Method:

1. Choose your dish(es). A medium-sized soufflé dish or 4 ramekins will work. Warm them, otherwise they might crack when you add the caramel.
2. Make the caramel: Place half the sugar and 2-3 tbsps water in a small, heavy saucepan and heat slowly until the sugar dissolves. Stir gently occasionally and don't let sugar stick to the sides of the pan (it should all be submerged in the watery sludge), or it may cause the whole thing to crystallise. A drop of lemon helps prevent this. Once the sugar has dissolved increase the heat and let it boil. Watch closely. When you're least expecting it the syrup will start darkening. Remove from the heat when it reaches a medium amber colour.
3. Line the mould(s): Pour the caramel into the warm dish(es) and swirl it round to coat the base and sides. Keep swirling until the caramel has set a little, and ceased to run. Sit the dish in cold water if this is taking too long.
4. Make the custard: Heat the milk with a pinch of salt and the vanilla bean and its scraped out seeds, if using one. Take off the heat just before it boils and let sit for 5 mins. Meanwhile whisk together the eggs, yolks and remaining sugar. Add a little of the hot milk to the eggs, stir, then add the rest in a slow stream. Stir to combine then strain through a sieve. This removes not only the bean but also the *chalazae* – the little ropes that suspend the yolk across the egg. If using vanilla extract, add it now.
5. Pour the custard into the lined mould(s). Place in a shallow dish surrounded by hot water coming half way up the side of the mould(s). Bake in the middle of an oven preheated to 160 C (325 F), turned down to 150 C (300 F) once the custard is in. It will take around 40 mins, less for ramekins, and more if you let the custard cool before baking it. Check it

regularly. It must not boil. It is done when it looks set right across the middle – gently wobble it to check. If you're not sure, insert a knife in the centre – it should come out clean. Chill the custard in its mould, then run a sharp, thin knife round the edge and turn out onto the serving plate. (Clamp the plate on top of the mould, quickly flip it over, let sit a minute, then carefully prise off the mould.) The caramel should run down the sides. You can make these in advance and turn them out when needed.

This is a classic recipe, which we have practised at school. It is based on one by Julia Child in 'Mastering the Art of French Cooking' (1961). To make your water bath extra safe for your delicate custards, line it with a towel. This protects the bottoms of the custards from getting too hot. Don't discard the vanilla bean (they're expensive). Instead wash and dry it, then add it to a jar of sugar and leave for a few weeks, shaking occasionally. This makes delicious vanilla sugar, which you can use the next time you make a custard.

Some notes on baked custards:

- Crème caramel is thought to have originated in southern France and/or northern Spain. Toulouse and Vitoria are both famous for theirs.
- It is popular throughout Europe, the Americas, Vietnam, Japan and elsewhere in Asia. In France it's also called *crème renversée au caramel*. In Spanish-speaking parts of the world, including the USA, it's called *flan*.
- It might have fallen a little out of vogue, but the baked custard is a very versatile and easy dish, so worth a come-back. You can make them with or without the caramel topping; you can eat them from the dish or turn them out; you can make one big one or little ramekins; they can be savoury or sweet; you can increase or decrease the richness by adjusting the ratio of cream to milk, and also yolks to whole eggs; you can increase or decrease the firmness of the consistency by adjusting the ratio of eggs to milk/cream; and you can experiment with all sorts of flavours. Of course, if you have a blowtorch, don't miss the opportunity to bake it, chill it, cover it in sugar and then caramelize the top to make *crème brûlée*.
- Good variations on the classic crème caramel are:
 - Coffee: Replace some of the milk with espresso/strong coffee.
 - Chocolate: Pour the scalded milk over some chocolate squares, let it melt, stir it up and then continue with the recipe.
 - Orange: Infuse orange peel (and a cinnamon stick if you wish) in the milk as it heats and cools, sprinkle orange zest in the dish before pouring on the caramel, and add a little Grand Marnier to the custard.
- My favourite savoury version so far involves roasted garlic, wild mushrooms on the side and a pool of super-rich demi-glace. But that's another story...

