

THE PERFECT GÂTEAU PARIS-BREST

Serves 10 to 12.

By Dennis W. Viau; modified from several recipes.

Gâteau Paris-Brest is supposed to represent a bicycle wheel, celebrating the bicycle race from Paris, France to Brest in Brittany. When I set out to make this confection the choux pastry dough (*pâte à choux*) was supposed to be easy. Many of my cookbooks tell aspiring bakers to start with *pâte à choux* because it is fool proof. I tossed 14 pastry rings in the trash, wasting more than 60 eggs and an untold amount of flour and butter, before coming up with the perfect formula and method for this pastry ring. This is easily the most complicated recipe I ever attempted. The directions fill two pages! But the end result was a *perfect* Gâteau Paris Brest.



Techniques learned:

1. Making *pâte à choux*.

Ingredients:

For the Praline Candy:

1 tablespoon baking soda
6 ounces (170g) hazelnuts, divided (some will be used for the pastry ring)
½ cup (125g) granulated sugar
¼ cup (60ml) water
1 teaspoon lemon juice
½ teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon vegetable oil

For the Pastry Cream Filling:

2 teaspoons unflavored gelatin
¼ cup (60ml) water
1½ cup (355ml) half-and-half
5 large egg yolks
⅓ cup (66g) granulated sugar
1½ tablespoons corn starch
3 tablespoons unsalted butter; chilled and cut into pieces
1½ teaspoons vanilla extract
1 cup (237ml) heavy cream; chilled

For the Choux Pastry Dough:

⅞ cup (205ml) water
4 ounces (113g) unsalted butter (regular butter is okay); cut into pieces
2 tablespoons granulated sugar
½ teaspoon salt (if using unsalted butter)
5 ounces (142g) bread flour
4 large eggs
2 tablespoons chopped hazelnuts (from the hazelnuts that were skinned and roasted earlier)

For Garnish:

Confectioners' (powdered) sugar

Directions:

For the Praline Candy:

Heat your oven to 350°F (175°C).

If you bought peeled hazelnuts you can skip this step. Heat 3 cups water in a medium saucepan to a boil. Add the baking soda (it will foam up) and the hazelnuts. Return to a boil and reduce the heat to low. Simmer 3 minutes. Meanwhile, set up a bowl with cold water. Add a few ice cubes. Drain the hazelnuts and place in the cold water. Allow to cool. With your fingers (it's easier using small pieces of paper towel) rub off the skins and discard. Meanwhile, line a baking sheet with parchment paper and place on a wire cooling rack.

Place the hazelnuts on a rimmed baking sheet and bake 15 minutes. Remove from the oven and allow to cool. Set aside about a third of the hazelnuts to be used for the pastry rings.

Bring sugar, water, and lemon juice to a boil in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Reduce heat to medium-low and boil the syrup, without stirring, until the temperature reaches the hard-crack stage of 310°F (150°C), 10 to 15 minutes. Add the hazelnuts and immediately pour the contents onto the lined baking sheet. Allow to cool thoroughly.

When cooked, break the candy into small pieces and place in a food processor fitted with a chopping blade. Process until finely chopped, about 30 seconds. Add the salt and vegetable oil and continue processing to a paste, 1 to 2 minutes. Transfer to a bowl, cover with plastic wrap, and set aside.

For the Pastry Cream Filling:

Sprinkle the gelatin onto the water and set aside to soften. Meanwhile, heat the half-and-half in a medium saucepan over medium heat just until it comes up to a simmer. While the milk is heating, whisk together the yolks and sugar until combined. Add the corn starch and combine. Remove the half-and-half from the heat and slowly pour about ½ cup into the yolk mixture, whisking constantly, to temper the yolks. Then pour the yolk mixture into the pan, whisking constantly.

Set a larger pan on the stove (one into which the medium saucepan will loosely fit) with enough water in the bottom such that the medium saucepan will just come into contact with the water when fitted inside. Heat the water to boiling. Reduce the heat to medium-low, place the smaller pan in the larger one (thus assembling a double boiler) and stir the yolk mixture while it cooks over the simmering water. Don't let the water boil up into the smaller pan. If it boils up, reduce the heat to low. Cook the custard, stirring constantly, until well thickened, about 8 minutes. (It will thicken quickly as soon as the temperature rises enough to set the corn starch, but continue cooking the entire 8 minutes. It will thicken considerably.)

Remove the saucepan from the double-boiler and whisk in the butter, vanilla, and softened gelatin until thoroughly combined to make a custard. Strain through a fine-mesh strainer over a large bowl. Press a piece of plastic wrap onto the surface of the custard and chill 45 minutes in the refrigerator.

Using a stand mixer fitted with a whisk, whip the cream at medium-low speed until it forms a foam, about 1 minute. Increase speed gradually to high and whip until soft peaks form, 1 to 3 minutes.

Break up the praline paste well with a whisk so that there are no lumps. Add half to the cream and whip until combined, making sure there are no lumps. (The lumps would block the piping tip in a later step.) Gently fold the whipped cream into the remaining praline paste and incorporate until smooth. Cover and refrigerate several hours, preferably overnight.

For the Choux Pastry Dough:

Draw an 8-inch circle on a sheet of parchment paper large enough to fit a baking sheet (12x17 inches/30x43 cm). Spray the baking sheet with nonstick cooking spray and apply the parchment paper to the baking sheet with the drawn circle on the underside. On two similar-sized parchment sheets draw two circles, one inside the other, 9 inches (23cm) and 7 inches (18cm). Place on sprayed baking sheets.

Beat eggs well in a small bowl or large cup and remove $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (60ml) of egg and set aside, covered with plastic wrap, to make an egg wash later. Heat oven to 400°F (200°C).

Heat the water, sugar, salt (if using), and butter in a medium saucepan over medium heat until the butter is fully melted and the liquid comes to a rapid boil. Add the flour, all at once, and immediately stir with a wooden spoon or heat-proof spatula, breaking up the lumps. Reduce heat to low and cook 3 to 4 minutes, turning and stirring constantly. Remove from the heat and transfer to a mixer bowl on a stand mixer fitted with a paddle. Mix at medium speed for 30 seconds to 1 minute to slightly cool.

Add the beaten egg, about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (60ml) at a time, and mix into the pastry batter thoroughly before adding more egg. When all the eggs are incorporated, scrape the sides of the bowl with a spatula and mix again for another 30 seconds. Continue mixing until the dough sticks to the sides of the bowl and strings form between the bowl and the beater blade. The batter should be thick and form stiff peaks, but it should be soft enough to push through a piping bag fitted with a large tip.

Transfer to a piping bag fitted with a coupling and a $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch wide circular tip. Pipe a bead, about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch (12mm) wide directly on top of the 8-inch (20cm) circle. Bake at 400°F (200°C) for 20 minutes. Remove from oven and transfer to a wire cooling rack.

Switch to a $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch (12mm) star tip and pipe a thin bead of pastry dough around the center between the two drawn circles on each of the two baking sheets. Alternating between the outer circle and the inner circle, pipe a bead of dough from on top of the line inward onto the center bead. If you find it easier, you can pipe a zigzag pattern, back and forth across the center bead.

Mix a teaspoon or two of milk into the egg that was set aside earlier. Brush both pastry rings generously with egg wash. Chop the remaining hazelnuts in a food processor or blender until reduced to a texture similar to bread crumbs. Sprinkle generously on top of one of the pastry rings. This ring will be the top of the Gâteau Paris-Brest.

Bake both rings at 400°F (200°C) for 30 minutes. Reduce the oven temperature to 325°F (165°C) and bake for an additional 30 minutes. Turn off the oven and open the door a little (use a wooden spoon, if necessary, to keep the door slightly open). Allow the pastry to cool thoroughly in the oven.

Carefully cut away part of the top of the lower ring (the one without the hazelnut topping) and remove. Turn the other ring upside down and carefully cut away part of the bottom, then invert again with the hazelnuts on top.

Place the pastry cream in a piping bag fitted with the $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch (12mm) star tip. Working back and forth in a zigzag pattern, pipe pastry cream onto the inside of the bottom ring, extending the cream a little over the outside and inside edges of the pastry. Place the thin ring (baked earlier) onto the cream, carefully pressing it gently into the cream. Pipe another zigzag bead of cream on top of the ring. Carefully press the top pastry ring onto the cream.

Finish by spooning some confectioners' (powdered) sugar into a wire-mesh sieve and dust the top of the pastry with sugar. Refrigerate until ready to serve. (Note: The pastry cream's texture is held partly by the chilled gelatin. As the cream warms, it will slightly liquefy; therefore, keep chilled until ready to serve and store the leftovers in the refrigerator.)

The step-by-step photos were removed. See the video for the preparation.