

Italian Fruit Tarts

from In Our Grandmothers' Kitchens

Ingredients:

for the tart shells:

1-1/2 sticks butter, softened
1/2 cup granulated sugar
2 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 egg yolk
1 teaspoon vanilla

for the pastry cream (crème patissière):

1-1/2 cups milk
3/4 cup sugar
4-1/2 tablespoons flour
1 pinch salt
3 egg yolks, slightly beaten
1 tablespoon vanilla

for assembly:

fresh fruit in season as needed (I used local peaches from Clarkdale Fruit Farms—wet but luscious!)

Instructions:

Begin with the tart shells. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. In a mixing bowl cream together the butter and the sugar until they are just blended. Add the flour and the salt, and stir until the mixture seems crumbly. (It will be dry.)

In a small bowl whisk together the egg yolk and the vanilla; drizzle this mixture over the flour mixture. Combine until the flour mixture is evenly moist; it will still be crumbly.

Divide the mixture among 6 4-inch tart pans. Press the dough evenly over the bottom and up the sides of the tart pans.

Bake the crusts for 16 to 20 minutes or until they are golden brown. Cool them for 15 minutes in their pans; then carefully remove them. Cool them completely before filling them. You may make them up to a couple of days ahead and store them in an airtight container.

Next, make the pastry cream. In a heavy pan heat the milk until it is hot, but do not let it come to a boil. Combine the sugar, flour, and salt in a bowl, and stir in the milk. Beat the mixture. Return it to the pan, and stir constantly over low heat for 4 to 6 minutes until it becomes thick and smooth.

Add a bit of the warm mixture to the beaten egg yolks, and then add a bit more; then stir the egg yolk blend into the rest of the pastry cream. Cook for 2 to 3 minutes, until the mixture resembles a thick custard. Cool, stirring every 5 minutes or so, and then stir in the vanilla.

When the pastry cream has cooled (allow at least half an hour for this; you may also cook it the day before and refrigerate it overnight), assemble the tart.

Spread the cream on top of the crust; then arrange the fruit attractively. Serve immediately. Serves 6 to 8.