Chill out in Brevard County with a cool dessert

Written by

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Chef Charles Imondi has fond memories of the icebox cake his grandmother used to make -- layering graham crackers, chocolate and vanilla pudding like a lasagna, topping with whipped cream and refrigerating until it was time to serve for dessert.

The only heat involved was cooking the pudding on the stove as there was no instant pudding in those days.

"It was all about not baking anything," said Imondi of Keiser University-Melbourne. "I could hear my grandmother saying, 'It's so hot, we're not going to turn the oven on.'"

Thank goodness for air conditioning these days. But who isn't looking for a chilled no-bake dessert, especially when temperatures are reaching beyond 90 degrees?

And admit it. As much as you love ice cream, you would welcome some other cold dessert alternatives.

Icebox desserts commonly combine cookies or crackers, such as graham crackers, with pudding or another gelatin mixture. The recipes are simple: a crust of stale cookies and instant pudding and pie filling.

"It's a very convenient style food -- and cool," Imondi said. "Even though you have air conditioning, you still don't want to turn your oven on."

Growing popularity

Icebox cakes get their name from iceboxes, which date back to the 1830s. The cakes were derived from the charlotte, a dessert that was popular during the Gilded Age -- the second half of the 19th century -- when French cooking was en vogue, said food historian Stephen Schmidt, author of the forthcoming "Dessert in America."

A charlotte is a mold lined with ladyfingers or sponge cake and filled with custard or whipped cream thickened with gelatin. "Icebox cakes are a simpler, homier
version of that dessert," he said.

In the first two decades of the 20th century, there are several charlotte and icebox cake recipes, he said. The desserts are similar but charlottes are unmolded onto a platter while icebox treats are served from their dish. The recipes usually call for pineapple or a combination of cherries, nuts and marshmallows, which were considered very fancy in those days, he said.

Credit goes to Nabisco for popularizing the dessert. Nabisco printed its recipe for icebox cake on tins of its Famous Chocolate Wafers in 1930, calling for layering wafers with whipped cream.

It was not uncommon for food companies to put out recipes to entice people to purchase their products, Imondi said. And Schmidt said refrigerator manufacturers were promoting things that could be made in the fridge.

There is no standard icebox cake recipe these days. The dessert seems to encompass everything from a no-bake cheesecake to peanut butter pie. Some people consider ice cream cake and ice cream pie to be icebox desserts, even though as Imondi points out, those could not have been stored in a traditional icebox.

"If I think of Italian cuisine, the most famous icebox cake, it's tiramisu," Imondi said. "You want to talk English, you're looking at a trifle. Nationality wise, you have a lot of

icebox-style cakes."

Easy to make

The desserts are very much homemade, Chattman said. Which explains why calls to several bakeries didn't turn up many.

Chef Robin Ryan of A Chef's Touch Catering Service in Port. St. John makes icebox cakes for barbecues, family get-togethers and even weddings. Her chocolate raspberry icebox cake has a graham cracker crust, a layer of ganache (chocolate and cream), fresh raspberries and is topped with whipped cream. "It's just so nice and refreshing."

Chef Stuart Borton of Yellow Dog Café in Malabar includes recipes for Peanut Butter Pie and New Zealand Kiwi Cheesecake in his cookbook. Both require no baking. "Kids can make these relatively easy," Borton said. "And they're just light, delightful desserts for the summer months."
Chattman said you are more likely to find ready-made icebox treats in a diner or ice cream shop. But she has plenty of recipes: Rice Pudding Pie, Cappuccino Crunch Cheesecake, Black Forest Ice Cream Cake, Blueberry and Spice Icebox Cupcakes.

"These recipes are really fun," she said. "They’re homey, but they’re still a little bit out of the ordinary."

**Head to freezer**

For those who want to go colder than an icebox, there always is the freezer.

Bruster’s Real Ice Cream in Titusville makes several ice cream cakes, including one with chocolate cake, fudge and OREO ice cream and another with yellow, chocolate or marble cake and butter pecan ice cream.

Other chains, such as Cold Stone Creamery, Marble slab Creamery, Baskin-Robbins and Dairy Queen, have ice cream cakes on the menu. (A tip for serving ice cream cake: let it sit on the counter to soften before serving.)

"Most people will have cake and a scoop of ice cream," said Wendy Dankovich, one of the owners of Bruster’s. "This is all integrated into one thing. And it’s just refreshing. Ice cream cake is refreshing."

But when it comes to the real McCoy icebox treat, you are probably better off making the nostalgic dessert at home. All you need is some vanilla wafers, instant banana pudding and fresh bananas, Imondi said.

Chattman recently whipped up lemon gelatin parfaits with homemade lemonade, gelatin and fresh strawberries. She layered them in a dessert goblet.

"The great thing about icebox desserts is if you have a refrigerator, you can make one," she said. "They’re just really fun and they’re something old but new."

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