



# Desserts

WICKED DESSERT TIME. All out cholesterol overload, feel ill, go and lie down on the couch to recover. Doze fitfully and then come back to life knowing you've had a really good dose.

Now doesn't that bring back memories. A few years back some good friends and I instigated the search for the best chocolate mousse. We had few conditions: any country, any continent, anywhere as long as it was superb. We started in France, moved on to Germany, had a brief pause in Australia for a few months where we worked on our seafood skills instead, and then headed back to Europe: to Belgium, Denmark and Holland.

Very serious we were at it too — laughter and hilarity over the other courses, but when it came to dessert, the palates were cleansed, posture improved and we all sat with our mousses and spoons, hopes raised and taste buds sharpened.

Texture, color, flavor, kick. All were judged critically. We worked our way steadily across the continent, disappointed and pleased, out would come the elaborate chart we drew up and the scores were added up. We did get a surprise from a mousse in strange little cafe in Kastel, Germany, mostly because we never imagined we would find near perfection there. We arrived in a screaming downpour, raced into the first cafe we found and spent half an hour drying our clothes and signalling desperately for the waitress to come and serve us.

We were close to abandoning all hope — until Lukas spotted chocolate mousse on the menu. Should we? Was there any hope it would beat the one we had tasted at La Croix Blanche near Cluny in France just a few weeks before?

Try it we did, and it suddenly shot to the top of the list — and stayed there, outdoing even the Belgian ones and a rather delicious one from Pompadour's in Huiden Straat in Amsterdam.

The winner however, was one made by my friend Lukas himself. Ably assisted by numerous bowl lickers and tasters. He refused to divulge the recipe. We generally found it better to eat it lying in bed and the ability to get up afterwards was in direct opposition to the amount of chocolate that went in. None of the former, plenty of the latter. Alack, as is often the way with true love, we broke up a few months later and I didn't feel it appropriate to beg for the recipe.

Years later, nothing comes close to Lukas' mousse. I will have to wait for a thaw in Sydney-Regensburg relations to ever taste something as good. Here's my poor attempt.

# Chocolate Mousse

5	eggs, separated
1 cup	bittersweet chocolate
1/2 cup	butter, cut into cubes
1 1/2 tbsp	superfine sugar
1 tbsp	strong, prepared coffee
Plus	whipped cream

Separate the eggs and set aside. Using a double saucepan melt the chocolate which you have broken into bits over a steady heat with the tablespoon of coffee. Stir carefully and as soon as all the chocolate is melted, add the butter and whisk well so that the mixture is smooth. No streaky bits. When the chocolate cools, use a wooden spoon to blend the egg yolks. Set aside.

Next in a ceramic or metal bowl whisk the egg whites. Make sure the bowl is very clean and free from grease. Lukas used to be a maniac about this part — he would wipe the bowl clean with a little vinegar just to make sure he would have the stiffest egg whites. The stiffer the whites, the better the mousse he would tell us. (Not that we would notice, we would be jostling for position around the chocolate bowl, waiting for the wooden spoon.)

Whisk those whites until they sit up and beg. Add the sugar at the end and whisk a little more. Then carefully combine the chocolate and the egg whites. You need to blend very well, otherwise the chocolate will sink as it sets. But you don't want to stir like mad and have an unfluffy mousse. Use the wooden spoon and go carefully.

Next spoon the mousse into your bowl (or little ramekins so every one has the same amount and doesn't squabble) and leave it in the fridge to set for a few hours, or even overnight. You can serve with whipped cream. Or you can just serve it with friends.

IT WAS THE FLIRTING that finally did it. Handing over the 1,000 ruble notes with a smile and not getting your hand back. Or getting it back attached to the person on the other side of the pile of tomatoes, knowing you would have to laugh it off because he gave you the biggest discount in the row and the last thing you want to do is destroy this tenuous business relationship.

*Tsentralny rynok* — the Central Market. A den of thieves.

Well, yes a den of treasures too. The best tomatoes, the biggest spice selection, the plumpest fruit, but a den of thieves nonetheless.

You know the scenario. That quick appraisal to see how rich and stupid you are. Trying you on with a quote of 8,000 rubles a kilo for eggplants to see if you will fall for it. Then if you haggle, they launch in with all best excuses on earth about all those dying grandmothers being supported back home.

I prefer the theater for my theater, and smiling helpful service when I buy my fruit and veg.

So I changed *rynoks*. Now I zoom up to the Leningradsky Rynok on Ulitsa Chasovaya where there are plenty of lads who will rip you off, but enough ladies selling delicious food as well. With a minimum of fuss and with a minimum of rubles.

But I never learn my lessons. This week, along with my usual hefty basket of lettuce, carrots, coriander, new potatoes and onions, I fell for a flirter. And found myself with a large squash I did not want, and two kilos of pears that were sweet and delicious, but were turning brown with alarming speed.

Pears are perfect with a good stilton cheese after dinner. But you can't offer guests brown, bruised pears, even if they are regular visitors and take the warts and all approach to friendship.

Ten guests came over on Sunday night and they had to have something pretty impressive (ie well disguised, brown pears in a fabulous dessert).

# Chocolate Pear Pudding

5 medium	pears
4 tbsp	butter, melted
2 tbsp	butter, softened
5/4 cup	plain flour, sifted
2 tbsp	golden syrup
1 large	egg, beaten
1/4 cup	milk
Plus	ice cream, or whipped cream

Preheat the oven to 180° Celsius. Melt the butter and let it cool. Mix together the plain flour, cocoa, baking powder, the brown sugar, golden syrup, the beaten egg, melted butter and the milk. Make sure it is evenly combined and has no lumps. Butter a baking dish (and remember you are going to serve the dessert in this dish at the table, so if it is an eyesore, think again). Then slice the pears. Don't worry about uniformity of size. Speed may be the best thing, just chop them roughly and drop them in evenly over the bottom of the dish. Dot the two extra tablespoons of butter over the pears then pour over the batter.

Bake the pudding in the oven for about 40 minutes, making sure the topping does not become too crusty. Serve hot with ice cream. Or if you are feeling extravagant, plenty of whipped cream.

SWEET TOOTHS READ ON. The rest of you should avoid this at all costs. This is the serious chocolate recipe. My favorite Pudding.

The story of its creation is, like most family legends, apocryphal. But it's a good one, so I think I'll tell it anyway.

My mother plays tennis once a week with a group of friends at the local tennis club. A great social event, in the old days everyone used to bring along cakes or scones or pikelets (mini pancakes slathered with jam and cream), thirst quenching drinks and all the paraphernalia of a good old hen's party. (Sorry Mum!)

Alas, by about five o'clock in the afternoon when the heat went out of the day and a few hard sets had been played, everyone felt like a drink with a bit more oomph than lemonade. The tennis club rules however were strict: No alcohol, no pets, no squealy kids.

Not to be outdone by such a silly rule, Mum discovered from her friend Heather (who lives in the country at a property called Bur-rungurralong, so it's no wonder this pudding is playful) that if you made a simple sponge cake, drowned it in good sherry and then buried it in chocolate, put it in the fridge for a day it would be exceptionally potent. That way all your friends at tennis would be deliciously fortified and well able to hit those top-spin lobs with much greater agility than before.

It's the sort of cake that suits many stressful situations here.

A word of warning however. Sherry is not just a tippie. It contains usually over seventeen percent alcohol so if you serve this dish you must take responsibility for the dreadful behavior of your guests.



# Chocolate Sherry Sponge

<i>1 large</i>	sponge cake
<i>2 cups</i>	bittersweet chocolate
<i>2</i>	eggs, separated
<i>1 cup</i>	sherry
<i>1 cup</i>	fresh cream
<i>1/4 cup</i>	chocolate for garnish

Melt the chocolate in a double saucepan until it is runny. (Microwavers, two minutes on high, but keep stirring it every now and then or it will burn).

Separate the two eggs. When the chocolate has cooled a little, pour in the generous cup of sherry and the two egg yolks. Stir carefully. In a separate ceramic or metal bowl whip the egg whites until stiff. Fold into the chocolate mixture and stir very carefully with a wooden spoon until combined.

Line a large cake tin with aluminum foil, and break up the sponge cake into smallish pieces. Drop them into the tin, but don't press down. Pour over the chocolate mixture so that it is oozing all over the cake. (*Optional*: if you foresee a long night, pour in another slug of sherry.)

Press down carefully so that the cake and mixture are evenly distributed, add more chocolate over the top. Cover the cake with more aluminum foil and put into the fridge.

This cake is best the next day. Whip the cream, carefully unfold the foil so the cake comes out in one pert piece, decorate with cream and grate over the extra chocolate.

Serving this dish with a small liqueur is not recommended.

THIS RECIPE IS A QUICKIE. I made it at an impromptu dinner party last week, and it was so good I had to make up an extra batch as soon as we wolfed down the first. Everyone seems to remember it as a great childhood meal — often called a Cobbler — and it still is.

This recipe makes a fruit crumble that is large enough for two, so double the ingredients if more are coming for dinner.



# *Fruit Crumble*

<i>1 cup</i>	fruit (apricots, peaches, apples)
<i>1 tbsp</i>	sugar
<i>1/4 cup</i>	cold water (to cover fruit)
<i>4 tbsp</i>	flour
<i>1 tsp</i>	baking powder
<i>2 tbsp</i>	butter
<i>5 tbsp</i>	soft brown sugar
<i>Plus</i>	cream or crème fraîche

Preheat oven to 180° Celsius. Remove the butter from the fridge to give it a chance to soften. Roughly chop the fruit and place it with a little cold water and a spoon of sugar in a pan and put it on low heat on the stove. This softens the fruit and speeds up the cooking process. Ten minutes ought to do it, or just as long as it takes to make the crumble. If you are using frozen fruit, omit this process; there is enough liquid in the fruit already.

Into a bowl put the flour, baking powder, butter (cut into small pieces) and soft brown sugar. Rub with your fingers until you have a consistent crumble mixture.

Remove the fruit from the stove and pour it into a small baking dish, the higher the sides the better. Pour the crumble over the top and carefully press the mixture down (the fruit will be burning hot) so that you have an even surface.

Bake on a high shelf in the oven for 25 minutes. The crumble won't rise very much but the aroma will drive you wild. While waiting, whip the cream, or wrestle the crème fraîche from whoever has got their paws on it and serve hot.

HALF OF MOSCOW KNOWS this already, so I'll tell the rest of you. I had a house guest. (I won't reveal his name because you will all be inviting him to stay next time he comes to Moscow.) He lived in my apartment for two weeks, was an absolute angel, didn't make a single international phone call. ("It's only rubles, Lindy, stop getting so huffy." Oh yeah. When was the last time you had to withstand the withering gaze of sixteen *babushki* behind you at the *Sberbank* when you present your nine thousand ruble phone bill, in five ruble notes?)

I was also out of the country at the time. I came home, everything was clean, the house guest had just left and there was a large box cluttering the kitchen. Interesting. Looked too big to be a bomb. I read the writing on the side, peeked in the lid, and promptly passed out.

As a thank you for having me to stay present he left me a microwave oven. Now that sets a precedent for my next house guests. I'm gunning for a washing machine next. Poor Geoff and Louise, they ought to be winging into town just as this comes out.

Naturally as soon as I invited Marc over to help me rewire the house (I can't run the shortwave and the microwave and expect to have a little leftover electricity for such mundane things as illumination at the same time) I felt it was time to cook.

And then I was stumped. I've never used one before. That reassuring whir and ping have never been a feature of my cooking life.

I started with the baby stuff — heating milk for my evening cocoa. (A marvelous convenience because you don't have to wash up the saucepan afterwards.) And had advanced to cheese on toast, defrosting the chicken and reheating last night's *khachapuri* when I realized I'll never get any further without recipe books, pyrex dishes and a new attitude.

So I did what anyone in this situation would do; I called Mum.

She has been using a microwave for years and knows all the tricks. She even kindly sent me a recipe for her current favorite dessert. Some of which is done in the microwave — and for those of you who don't have one (*hee hee*), it is also possible to make in a conventional oven.

# *Sticky Toffee Pudding*

<i>1/2 cup</i>	butter, softened
<i>1/2 cup</i>	sugar
<i>2 cups</i>	plain flour
<i>2 tsp</i>	baking powder
<i>4</i>	eggs
<i>2 cups</i>	dates
<i>2 cups</i>	water
<i>1-1/2 tsp</i>	bicarbonate soda

Cream the butter and sugar. Add eggs one at a time and beat. Then fold in the flour and baking powder. In a saucepan on the stove bring to boil the dates in the water and simmer for two minutes. Stir in the bicarb soda. While still fizzing stir this into the cake mixture. Pour the mixture into a greased cake tin and bake for 30 minutes in a moderate oven. Serve warm with oodles of butterscotch sauce.

<i>1 cup</i>	brown sugar, lightly packed
<i>1 tbsp</i>	butter
<i>1/2 cup</i>	water
<i>1/2 tsp</i>	vanilla essence
<i>1 tsp</i>	cornflour

*Butterscotch Sauce:* Place brown sugar and water in a bowl and cook on high in the microwave oven for two minutes, stirring once. Add butter and cook for a further two minutes. Blend cornflour with 2 tablespoons hot water, then add the mixture to the sauce and stir. Cook for another two minutes, stirring occasionally. Add the vanilla and stir to combine.