



the basics of brûlée

Crème brûlée is a dish destined for the Dessert Hall of Fame. But it's not just for restaurants—it's easy to make it at home!

Behind crème brûlée

A few techniques will give homemade crème brûlée the flavor and texture of restaurant versions.

First, for maximum “vanilla-ness,” use a vanilla bean—its intense flavor is worth the high price tag. To get the most out of it, pulverize the bean with sugar, then add this vanilla sugar to the cream. If using a bean just isn’t an option, that’s okay. Add a tablespoon of pure vanilla extract (not imitation!) to the egg mixture.

Second, “temper” the warm cream into the eggs, slowly whisking it in. Tempering raises the eggs’

temperature without running the risk of scrambling. It’s also important to bake the custards in a water bath, or *bain marie*, to ensure they don’t curdle.

When setting up the water bath, use a baking pan with sides that are no taller than 2". If they’re higher than that, air won’t circulate around the dishes very well. That means the custards will take longer to cook, increasing the odds of curdling. Also, be sure that the pan is large enough so the dishes don’t touch—water should surround each one.

Bake the custards just until set. To test, gently tap one in the center—if it’s still runny, bake 3–5 more minutes, then test again (oven temperatures vary, so your baking time may be a little different than mine).

When they quiver like Jell-O, they’re done. They may seem soft, but they’ll keep cooking from residual heat, and will firm up even more with chilling. The custards *must* be cold before caramelizing or they’ll melt from the torch.

onlinevideo
tempering

VANILLA CRÈME BRÛLÉE

MAKES SIX 4-OZ. RAMEKINS

TOTAL TIME: ABOUT 1 HOUR + CHILLING

PULVERIZE:

1/2 vanilla bean, chopped into 1/4" pieces

2 T. sugar

WARM:

1 cup heavy cream

1 cup half and half

Vanilla sugar

WHISK TOGETHER:

3 egg yolks

1 egg

1/4 cup sugar

Pinch of salt

CARAMELIZE CUSTARDS WITH:

Crème Brûlée Sugar, see right

Preheat oven to 325°.

Pulverize vanilla bean and 2 T. sugar in a coffee grinder.

Warm cream, half and half, and vanilla sugar in a saucepan over medium heat just until steam rises.

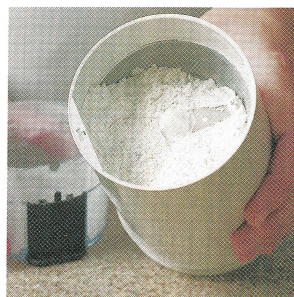
Whisk yolks, egg, 1/4 cup sugar, and salt together in a mixing bowl.

Temper hot cream mixture into eggs, strain into a measuring cup with a pour spout, and divide among six 4-oz. ovenproof ramekins. Arrange dishes in a baking pan, then carefully transfer the pan to the oven. Add hot water to the pan and bake custards 35–45 minutes, or until just set; do not overcook.

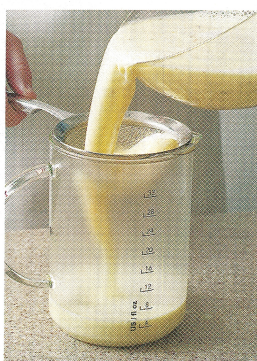
Remove ramekins from the water bath, cool, then wrap loosely in plastic wrap. Chill until completely cold, preferably overnight.

Caramelize each custard before serving by burning sugar on top.

◀ Crème brûlée bakes the most evenly in shallow dishes, but regular ramekins work okay. The dishes’ size and volume may alter the recipe yield.



◀ Grind sugar and vanilla bean in a coffee grinder until powdery.



◀ Strain tempered mixture to eliminate vanilla bean pieces.



▲ Fill dishes with custard to about 1/4" from the top. Bake in a water bath until just set, about 40 minutes.



feel the burn

It's what you've been waiting for—tapping into that crackly layer of sugar! Here's how to do it.

"Burning" crème brûlée isn't as hard as it looks. All you need is a kitchen torch and special sugar, *see below*.

This blend of brown and white sugar caramelizes quickly so the custards won't be as prone to curdle from prolonged heat of the torch. Wave the flame over the surface—don't leave it in one spot too long or the sugar will turn black. And let the brûlées stand a few minutes after burning so the topping hardens.

CRÈME BRÛLÉE SUGAR

MAKES $\frac{3}{4}$ CUP (ENOUGH FOR SIX 4-OZ. CRÈME BRÛLÉES)

TOTAL TIME: ABOUT 1 HOUR

COMBINE; DRY AND PULVERIZE:

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup brown sugar

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar

Combine both sugars, then spread the mixture out on a parchment-lined baking sheet. After baking the brûlées, turn off the oven and place the pan inside for an hour to dry out the sugar.

Transfer sugar to a food processor and pulverize until fine. Store in an airtight container until ready to caramelize.



1 Blot top of custards dry with a paper towel, if needed. Sprinkle 1–2 T. sugar mixture over each one; tap out any excess sugar.

2 Using a kitchen or propane torch, melt the sugar by waving the flame 4–8" from the surface.

3 Burn until surface of the custard is caramelized and no dry sugar is visible. Let stand 3–5 minutes before serving.



torches

Crème brûlée's popularity has made kitchen torches a fairly common houseware and kitchen store item. The small ones here retail for about \$40, are butane-filled (canisters sold separately), and do a great job on the crispy topping. Propane torches from hardware stores are also good (\$10–\$40 depending on models). Don't use oven broilers—they heat unevenly and cause curdling.

