

Chocolate Cream Puffs with Mascarpone Filling

Makes 15 puffs

For about twenty-four hours, I thought I had invented chocolate *pâte à choux*, and those hours were pretty sweet. I'd never tasted chocolate cream puffs, I'd never seen them and I was so tickled that I'd made them. And then chocolate cream puffs seemed to pop up in books and magazines, *pâtisseries* and restaurants everywhere. Had I just never noticed?

While everything made with *pâte à choux* is dramatic, these are both dramatic and sexy. It's the magic of that vixen, cocoa. There's not much of it in the dough, but it's enough to transform the traditional cream puff, to turn it dark, dark brown and to give it a true chocolate flavor.

The puffs make wonderful Profiteroles and they're fun with a crackle top, but I like them most filled with something velvety, like chocolate mousse or a mix of mascarpone and whipped cream, as in this recipe. Consider going totally romantic and adding a little rose extract (available online) to the mascarpone filling, maybe even tinting it pink, and then surprising your Valentine with a platter piled high with puffs.

For the cream puffs

½ cup (68 grams) all-purpose flour
1½ tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder
1/3 cup (80 ml) water
¼ cup (60 ml) whole milk
½ stick (4 tablespoons;
2 ounces; 57 grams) unsalted butter, cut into chunks
1 tablespoon sugar
¼ teaspoon fine sea salt
2 large eggs, at room temperature

For the filling

½ cup (113 grams) mascarpone, chilled
½ cup (120 ml) very cold heavy cream
2 tablespoons sugar
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract or ½ teaspoon pure rose extract, preferably Star Kay
White, or rose water to taste
Red food coloring (optional)
Confectioners' sugar, for dusting

To make the puffs:

~ Center a rack in the oven and preheat the oven to 425 degrees F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper or a silicone baking mat.

~ Sift the flour and cocoa together into a small bowl.

~ Put the water, milk, butter, sugar and salt in a medium saucepan and bring to a boil over high heat. Add the flour and cocoa all at once, lower the heat to medium-low and, using a wooden spoon or sturdy heatproof spatula, stir like mad. The mixture will come together in a ball and there will be a film on the bottom of the pan, but don't stop stirring—give it another minute of energetic beating. Transfer the hot dough to the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, or a large bowl in which you can use a hand mixer, and let it rest for 2 minutes.

~ Beat the dough for 1 minute, then add the eggs one by one, beating very well after each egg goes in. You'll have a smooth, shiny dough.

~ Place mounds of dough on the baking sheets using a small cookie scoop (one with a 2-teaspoon capacity, my tool of choice) or dropping the dough by small spoonfuls; leave about 2 inches between them.

~ Slide the baking sheet into the oven, then immediately reduce the oven temperature to 375 degrees F. Bake for 25 to 30 minutes, rotating the sheet at the midway point, or until the puffs feel hollow and lift off the paper or mat easily. Cool to room temperature on a cooling rack before filling.

~ To make the filling: Put the mascarpone in a medium bowl and, using a flexible spatula, stir it gently to loosen it. Beating makes mascarpone grainy, so go easy.

~ Whip the heavy cream in a small bowl just until it starts to thicken. Beat in the sugar and vanilla or rose extract and continue to whip until the cream holds medium peaks. If you're using red food coloring, add a drop and mix it in, then add more coloring, if needed. Continue to mix until the cream holds firm peaks. Stir a spoonful of the cream into the mascarpone to lighten it, then gently fold in the remainder. (The cream can be made a few hours ahead and refrigerated.)

~ To fill the puffs: Just before serving, cut or carefully pull the cream puffs apart at their middles. If you'd like, you can hollow out the base of the puffs by removing the custardy interior. (I like the creamy center and always leave it.) Spoon or pipe some filling (using a pastry bag with a plain tip or a zipper-lock plastic bag from which you've snipped off a corner) into the base of each puff; replace the tops. If you'd like, the puffs can be chilled for about 30 minutes.

~ Dust the puffs with confectioners' sugar just before serving.

Serving: The puffs should be served at room temperature or slightly chilled. If you want to go deliciously overboard, you could pass some chocolate sauce at the table.

Storing: The cream puffs can be scooped and frozen for up to 2 months before baking—bake them from the freezer, no defrosting necessary. And the cream filling can be made a few hours ahead and kept refrigerated. However, it's best to fill the puffs just before serving.