


Sweet corn in desserts? Sweet.

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By Meredith Goad

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When sweet corn season rolls around, most Mainers dream about slathering an ear with butter, sprinkling it with salt and eating it with a steamed lobster. Corn and lobster (followed by a slice of blueberry pie) is summer on a plate.

Pastry chefs, on the other hand, dream of stripping the kernels from those ears and using them – and sometimes the bare cobs – to make dessert.

When the corn harvest begins, Krista Desjarlais, owner of Bresca & the Honey Bee, an ice cream stand and snack bar in New Gloucester, plans to infuse milk and cream with corn cobs to make corn ice cream, and to bake poached corn kernels into buttery financiers. Brant Dadaleares, owner of Gross Confection Bar in Portland, has made shortbreads flavored with grated corn and cornmeal, as well as corn ice cream and corn panna cotta. This year, he wants to try a steamed corn cake and experiment with corn sauces.

“I’ve definitely had people say why would you put corn in a dessert?” Dadaleares said. “And my initial response is, it’s an incredible flavor on its own, but it pairs very well with a lot of things, sweet and savory. It’s a seasonal ingredient, and we use all the seasonal ingredients we possibly can.”

April Robinson, who has worked at Fore Street in Portland and Tao Yuan in Brunswick, has been sketching ideas for her new business, Ritual Bakehouse and Patisserie which she hopes to open in Brunswick soon. Among her creations is an éclair filled with sour cherries and corn-infused pastry cream.

“It’s such a short growing season here,” Robinson said. “We have 10 months of winter and then two months of enjoying everything that nature wants to throw at us, so you really have to make it count.”

At Chaval in Portland, co-owner/pastry chef Ilma Lopez has been serving corn ice cream with a drizzle of olive oil and a few fresh thyme leaves atop a caramel *pâté à choux* filled with lemon curd and black raspberries. The dish is finished with a touch of Maldon sea salt.

These chefs say corn is a versatile vegetable that can be used in a lot of ways in desserts, and it’s easy enough to try at home. Sweet and milky, corn imparts a subtle flavor that enhances other ingredients. Robinson uses it as “a secondary note,” sometimes roasting it to give it a whole other flavor element. Corn is also forgiving, she said. Add cooked plums to cake batter and the result may be cake soup, she said, “but I feel like with corn it’s really hard to mess up a recipe in that way.”



Corn adds summer flavor to homemade ice cream. Here, a few stripped cobs and a vanilla bean steep in a pot of cream. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

Desjarlais said corn desserts are “so approachable.” It’s asking someone to try a food they love, she said, but in a different way. Think corn-infused *crème brûlée*, or corn panna cotta. Corn has “a natural affinity for custard,” Desjarlais said, “but I think baking it into cakes and things like that – poaching the corn lightly in milk with sugar and incorporating it into a batter – can be really, really good.”

The infused milk (add a vanilla bean for extra flavor) can be strained and used alone, she said, or rough puree the poached kernels and add them as well to provide texture.

There are a few do's and don'ts when making corn desserts. Don't throw away the bare cobs. They can be used to add even more flavor. Dadaleares makes his corn ice cream by steeping the cobs in the ice cream base for a couple of days before churning the ice cream.

Don't overcook the kernels, Dadaleares said. "Overcooked corn is going to pull out a lot of the starch and it will become very gummy, and that's not a good texture to have in anything," he said.



Blueberries have a natural affinity for corn. Kern makes blueberry compote to go with her no churn corn ice cream. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

And if you're pairing corn with fruit in a dessert, think carefully about the choices. Acid is not corn's friend, Desjarlais said. A grapefruit tart with corn doesn't sound appetizing, "but when I think about a blueberry tart with a corn custard, I think 'OK, that's super delicious.'"

One of Robinson's biggest "do's" is to add lots of butter and salt when sweating the corn before adding it to a dessert. Sometimes she adds herbs. (A wide variety of herbs go well with corn, these pastry chefs say, such as thyme, basil, tarragon, dill, mint and summer savory.) Think about corn on the cob at a lobster bake, or a bowl of popcorn – it's usually drenched with butter and salt.

“When you load it up with butter and salt, then it’s so much more intensely corn,” Robinson said. “Let’s say you steam your corn. Have it straight out of the steamer and it’s good. Douse it in butter and salt, and suddenly it’s a flavor bomb.”

Robinson sometimes adds smokiness to the corn by roasting the kernels. She tosses them in a blend of olive oil and melted butter, or a vinaigrette of olive oil and champagne vinegar, and roasts them in a single layer at 450 degrees F until they show a little color.

Robinson said she never used corn in desserts until she moved to Maine about nine years ago and absorbed the state’s passion for farm-to-table cuisine. Before moving here, she worked mostly for French-trained chefs. Robinson spent plenty of time when she was growing up visiting family in Mexico – her mother is Mexican – but while sweet corn ice cream is a popular flavor there, her own occasional desserts were usually mango with chili and lime, or flour tortillas with cinnamon sugar.

Now she’s making composed desserts with corn, such as the corn-sour cherry éclair she’s planning for her bakery. The sour cherries, she said, are “tart and bright and help to elevate the corn a little bit.”

She’ll finish the eclairs with dulcey (caramelized white chocolate) ganache, which has a flavor she thinks hints of caramel corn, then garnish them with candied corn, or popcorn and cherry halves. Cut the éclair in half, and you’ll see concentric circles of herb-flecked pastry, corn pastry cream, and at the center, sour cherries.

“You want to look at them, right?” Robinson said. “You don’t want to just shove it in your face.”

Speak for yourself, April.



Polenta Shortcrust Tart with Apricots and Buttered Corn *Photo by April Robinson*

April Robinson's Polenta Shortcrust Tart with Apricots and Buttered Corn

You will only need half the pastry dough here. Reserve the other half for another tart.

Serves 6, or 8 with ice cream

FOR THE SHORTCRUST:

1 cup plus 3 tablespoons (180 grams) all-purpose flour
½ cup (90 grams) yellow polenta
4 tablespoons (54 grams) sugar
12 tablespoons or 1 1/2 sticks butter (170 grams), chilled
¼ teaspoon salt
2½ tablespoons cold water

FOR THE FRANGIPANE:

½ cup (113 grams) butter, softened
½ cup plus 1 tablespoon (115 grams) sugar
2 eggs, room temperature
1 cup (120 grams) almond flour
¼ cup (30 grams) all-purpose flour
¼ teaspoon kosher salt

FOR THE BUTTERED CORN:

1 ear of corn
2 teaspoons extra-virgin olive oil
2 tablespoons butter
1/8 teaspoon kosher salt
1/8 teaspoon black pepper
2 teaspoons sugar

FOR ASSEMBLY:

3 large or five small apricots, cut into quarters
1-2 tablespoons honey, warmed
Apricot jam, warmed, optional
Small basil leaves, optional

To make the crust, whisk together the flour, polenta and sugar. Using 2 knives or a pastry cutter, cut in the cold butter until the mixture has the texture of breadcrumbs. Dissolve the salt in the cold water and mix until it just comes together. Form the dough into 2 discs – you will only need 1 of them for this recipe – wrap them in plastic and chill for at least 1 hour.

To make the frangipane, whip the butter with the sugar until light and airy; the mixture will lighten in color. Add the eggs, 1 at a time, scraping the bowl between each addition. Combine the flours with the salt, and add to the frangipane in 3 additions, also scraping bowl between turns. Refrigerate the frangipane until ready to use.

To make the buttered corn, remove the kernels from the cob and reserve the cob for another use. Heat a wide pan with the olive oil and butter, then the add kernels. Season with the salt and pepper. Cook at medium high heat until kernels are cooked but not mushy. Add the sugar, if necessary, to balance the flavors. Chill.

To assemble the tart, preheat the oven to 375 degrees F. Remove 1 pastry disc from the refrigerator. Roll out the pastry in a circle, on a lightly floured surface, to about ¼-inch thick. Trim to form a (roughly) 10-inch circle and roll in the edges, so you have a lip to contain the frangipane and fruit. Chill the pastry shell for 30-40 minutes.

After the shell is chilled, fold the buttered corn into the softened frangipane and spread the mixture in the pastry shell. Arrange the sliced apricots atop the frangipane in a circular pattern or leave them in halves or quarters and arrange as you please. “This is the time to follow your creative spirit!” Robinson says.

Brush the tart lightly with warm honey and bake for about 30 minutes, until the pastry is golden, and apricots have a little color along the edges.

Remove the tart from the oven and let cool 15-20 minutes. If you like, glaze it with melted apricot jam and garnish it with small basil leaves (“or thyme, rosemary, dill, anything really,” Robinson says).



A cone of No Churn Corn Ice Cream with Maine Maple–Blueberry Compote at Bresca & the Honeybee.
Photo courtesy of Krista Kern

No Churn Corn Ice Cream with Maine Maple–Blueberry Compote

Recipe from Krista Kern Desjarlais of Bresca & The Honeybee in New Gloucester and The Purple House in North Yarmouth. You need to plan ahead for this ice cream, allowing enough time for the cream to infuse (overnight) and subsequently for the mixture to freeze (also overnight).

Serves 12

CORN ICE CREAM:

6 ears sweet yellow corn, shucked
4 cups heavy cream
2 (15-ounce) cans sweetened condensed milk
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
1 teaspoon kosher salt

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F.

Place the corn on a parchment-lined sheet tray. To create steam, add 2 tablespoons water to the tray and cover with foil. Roast for 35-45 minutes until tender. Once the corn is tender, remove from the oven and cool. Strip the kernels from the cobs and refrigerate. Reserve 4 cobs.

Place the cream in a medium pot. Break 4 of the stripped cobs in half and add to the pot. Heat the mixture to a low simmer and simmer for 15-20 minutes. Do not let it boil. Remove from the heat and cool in the pan to infuse the cream with sweet corn flavor. Once the cream has cooled, strain out the cobs and refrigerate the cream overnight.

On day two, put the sweetened condensed milk in a bowl and add the vanilla and salt. Mix.

Whip the corn-infused cream to stiff peaks and gently fold it into the condensed milk mixture. Fold in the reserved corn kernels. Scrape the mixture into a 9 x 5-inch loaf pan that you have lined with wax paper. Cover the top with plastic wrap to protect flavor. Freeze overnight. To serve, scoop out the ice cream or turn out the loaf and slice. Serve with Maine Maple-Blueberry Compote.

MAINE MAPLE-BLUEBERRY COMPOTE:

2 pints blueberries, divided
1/2 cup maple syrup
Generous 1/3 cup water
Pinch sea salt
Squeeze of lemon juice

Place 1 pint of the blueberries and the remaining ingredients in a small pot and bring to a gentle simmer. Simmer for 5 minutes.

Remove from the heat and stir in the remaining 1 pint uncooked blueberries. Cool.

Serve the compote warm, at room temperature, or chilled with the corn ice cream.

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