

INDIVIDUAL

Chocolate pavlovas

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A pavlova is a meringue-cake, calling for little more than egg whites and sugar. It is baked at a low temperature for a long time, and results in one of the most texturally exquisite treats I know, what with its crisp, on the verge of shattering, exterior and marshmallow-y interior. Moreover, if you bake a separate, smaller pavlova for each guest, rather than one large one, you please everyone's inner child (kids like their own individual dessert, FYI). If you add chocolate to the mix, pavlovas are wonderfully fudgy, almost brownie-like in the center; and not quite as cloyingly sweet as their vanilla counterpart. Finally, pavlovas are flourless, and fat- and dairy-free, and if served without the requisite whipped cream, they might just be the dessert your New Year's resolution ordered.

Now, truth be told, I don't often (like never) make desserts that are purposefully gluten or dairy-free (unless I am baking for a person with an allergy) or low in sugar or fat, but the magazine's theme this month is health and wellness, and I am trying to be a team-player. With that said, these pavlovas, in their non-fat, dairy-free, and flourless way, while not exactly healthy, are guaranteed to make you feel awfully well.

They're time-consuming

They do take a bit of time to bake – not only is there an hour spent in the oven while it's on, but there are several hours spent in the oven once

turned off (this time in the dark oven helps the pavlovas dry out and form the hard exterior and soft interior described above). However, the results are so tasty and so special, that your New Year's resolution to eat less fat and gluten and dairy, is going to be much easier, and much more fun, to keep than you could have ever imagined.

Ingredients:

Yield: 10 individual pavlovas
6 egg whites
1/2 teaspoon table salt
1 1/2 cups superfine sugar, or regular
1 1/2 teaspoon arrowroot powder, or cornstarch
2 1/2 teaspoons white vinegar
1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
1/4 cup Dutch process cocoa powder
2 ounces dark chocolate, chopped, optional
Fresh fruit for serving
Lightly whipped cream for serving, optional, New Year's resolution dependent

Instructions:

Preheat the oven to 275 degrees Fahrenheit. Line two cookie sheets with parchment paper. Set aside.

Place the whites and the salt in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, or in a large mixing bowl and using a hand mixer, whisk on medium until soft peaks form, about five minutes. Add the sugar very slowly, a tablespoon at a time, and then the arrowroot powder, and continue whisking on medium high, until the meringue is glossy, thick, and holds stiff peaks, about five minutes. Add the vinegar and vanilla and whisk to incorporate.



Remove the bowl from the mixer and sift the cocoa powder over the egg whites and sugar, add the chopped chocolate, if using, and very gently – and only partially – fold the cocoa in, leaving visible streaks of chocolate. If you fold the cocoa in completely, you risk deflating the whites, and missing out on the chocolate-y stripes.

Divide the meringue into ten 1/2 cup portions between the two pans (I use a 1/4 cup cookie scoop), and using the back of a spoon or an offset spatula, flatten the tops, just a bit. Ideally you want short, squat shapes, as opposed to skinny, flat ones.

Transfer the sheets to the oven and bake for 55-65 minutes, or until dry to the touch. This may take longer than 65 minutes, or shorter than 55: it all depends on your oven. I think it's best to check on the pavlovas at the 55 minute mark and maybe every five or ten minutes after that. To do so, lightly touch their tops – they should feel dry, but not rock hard – as if you could easily puncture their crisp tops with your finger.

Turn the oven off and keep the

pavlovas in the oven, with the door propped slightly open, until they reach room temperature. This will take at least four hours and is best achieved by leaving them in the oven overnight.

Serve the pavlovas with fresh fruit – citrus is lovely this time of year, and a few sections of a blood orange served along side each pavlova would be so pretty. Or try a sprinkling of pomegranate seeds. And if you're okay with eating berries in the off-season, pavlovas are always lovely served with mixed berries. Finally, depending on how committed you are to your New Year's resolutions and how strict said resolutions are, lightly whipped cream is never a mistake. •

Jessie is a baker and cookbook author, you can learn more about her through her website jessiesheehanbakes.com.