



Banana Pudding

BY SHERI CASTLE

Not every barbecue place serves banana pudding, but more barbecue places serve banana pudding than any other single dessert. It's a creamy cool-down after a smoky, robust meal. Some places scoop individual servings into grab-and-go cups, given that portability is a plus for barbecue desserts, especially in places that focus on lunch or take-away service. Folks need to get back to work or hit the road. But that doesn't mean we should rush when making our banana pudding. Some places have taken so many shortcuts that all that's left is instant pudding, Cool Whip, busted cookies, and wishful thinking. This is the real deal, featuring rich, silky homemade custard and real whipped cream. But do buy the Nilla Wafers; they can't be improved on.

Banana pudding is likely a distant cousin of British trifles made of stale cake, custard, cream, and fruit. Bananas have sailed into our deep Southern ports for generations, initially making their way inland by train to small-town whistle stops in the days before refrigeration. Today, bananas are inexpensive, available year-round, and easy to find, even in a basket near the register at the corner quick mart.

For banana pudding that's show-off special, use bananas that are golden yellow with a smattering of light brown freckles, the sure sign of perfect ripeness. I recommend taking the extra step of infusing the milk for the custard with bananas as well, to enhance the flavor.

Makes 8 servings

3 cups whole milk
4 to 6 ripe bananas
3/4 cup granulated sugar
1/4 cup cornstarch
Big pinch of kosher salt
6 large egg yolks
3 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into pats and chilled
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
5 to 7 ounces Nilla Wafers
1 cup whipping cream, chilled
1/4 cup powdered sugar
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract

Pour the milk into a small saucepan. Peel 2 bananas, cut them into chunks, and add them to the pan. Bring to a bare simmer over medium heat, stirring gently. Remove from the heat and let stand at room temperature until cool, about 2 hours. Do not let it stand so long that the bananas darken the milk. Strain the milk and discard the bananas.

Sift the granulated sugar and cornstarch together into a medium saucepan. While whisking, add the milk in a slow, steady stream, and whisk until smooth. Strain the egg yolks through a mesh sieve into the milk. Whisk until smooth. Drop in the butter. Place over medium heat and cook until the custard thickens, 8 to 10 minutes, stirring slowly and continuously with a heat-proof spatula. When ready, the custard will coat the back of the spatula. Remove from the heat and stir in the vanilla.

Spread a thin layer of warm custard over the bottom of a shallow 1 1/2-quart dish. Cover with a single layer of Nilla Wafers. Peel and slice 1 or 2 bananas (depending on their size and how much banana you like) over the wafers. Cover with custard. Add another layer of Nilla Wafers and bananas, and then pour the rest of the custard into the dish, making sure the bananas are covered. (If you like firmer, cakier pudding, make 3 layers of wafers, bananas, and custard.)

Press a sheet of plastic wrap directly onto the custard to keep a skin from forming. Refrigerate the pudding until completely chilled, at least 4 hours and preferably overnight.

Just before serving, whip the cream, powdered sugar, and vanilla to stiff peaks and spread over the top of the pudding.

Serve chilled.

Variation:

Some people prefer meringue on banana pudding. However, baked meringue can quickly turn soft and sticky on hot, humid days, making it a risky venture in the South. If you want to give it a go nonetheless, here's one way to do it. Know that the meringue must go on while the pudding is still warm, so have the ingredients prepped and don't tarry.

Assemble the pudding in a heatproof dish. Position an oven rack in the lower third of the oven and preheat to 400°F. With a mixer on low speed, beat 1/2 cup room temperature egg whites (from about 4 large eggs), 1/4 teaspoon cream of tartar, and 1/4 teaspoon salt in a squeaky clean glass or metal bowl until frothy. Increase the speed to medium and add 1/3 cup granulated sugar, 1 tablespoon at a time.

Increase the speed to high and continue beating until stiff peaks form. Spoon the meringue on top of the hot custard and spread it all the way to the rim of the dish. Make pretty whorls and peaks with the back of a spoon. Bake until the meringue is golden brown, about 15 minutes. Cool to room temperature, about 1 hour, and then refrigerate until chilled.