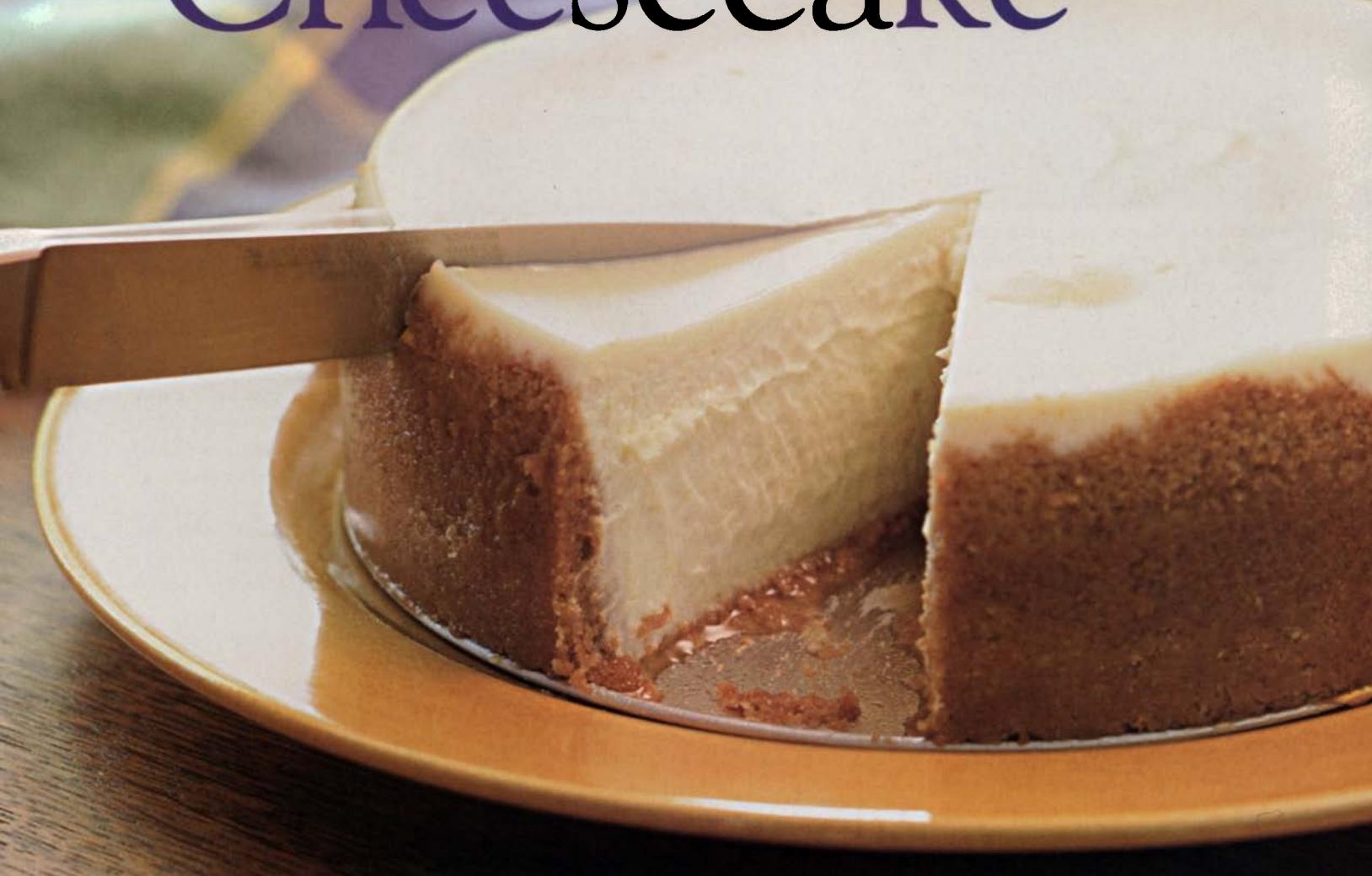


Smooth, Creamy Cheesecake



For a silky-smooth filling, omit the starch and bake in a water bath until the edges are set but the center jiggles

BY ROSE LEVY BERANBAUM

If there could be only one type of cake in the world, let it be cheesecake. Of course, some people would argue that cheesecake, with its smooth, creamy texture, isn't really a cake at all except in shape. Indeed, my favorite style of cheesecake is more custard than cake, set by eggs rather than by starch. That's the key to its satiny texture. As long as I treat cheesecake like a custard, coddling it in a water bath and baking it until set at the edges but still wobbly in the center, I never fail to get the supremely smooth texture that I adore.

Cheesecake is the easiest cake to make. It can be mixed in minutes with an electric mixer or in less than



The quintessential cheesecake: dense, creamy, and faintly lemony.

a minute in a food processor. My basic cheesecake is dense, creamy, and tangy. It consists simply of cream cheese, sour cream, fresh lemon juice, sugar, eggs, salt, and pure vanilla extract. Some cheesecake recipes include flour or cornstarch to help firm them up, but I prefer to let the eggs do all the thickening rather than add a starch, which would produce a slightly denser texture. (See *Food Science*, p. 74, for a discussion of cheesecakes with starch and without.) For the cream cheese, I like Philadelphia brand. Natural and low-fat cream cheeses don't seem to work as well. Bring the cream cheese to room temperature so it softens and blends completely with the other ingredients. To



prevent aeration, which can cause the cheesecake to rise unevenly, be careful not to overmix the batter.

I like to dress up cheesecakes with a crust and a topping. I might use cookie crumbs or a thin layer of tender sponge cake for a crust. For a stunning special-occasion cheesecake, I might line the sides of the pan with ladyfingers. My pumpkin cheesecake (p. 68) is heavenly when garnished with swirls of caramel sauce (visit www.finecooking.com for my sauce recipe). Fruit glazes thickened with cornstarch (not gelatin, which would dissolve from acidity in the batter) make wonderful toppings; try sour cherry, blueberry, cranberry, or even a lemon curd.

Choose the right size pan

The ideal pan for cheesecake is a springform. A deep cake pan will also work, but you'll have to invert the cheesecake twice to unmold it. My classic cheesecake needs an 8-inch pan; the pumpkin one needs a 9-inch pan. Be safe: measure with a ruler, inside rim to inside rim. Pan size is important because it affects cooking time (in too small a pan, the filling will rise higher and take longer to cook; vice versa for too big a pan).

Crushed cookie crusts provide contrasting texture and flavor. Sometimes I press the cookie

"My cheesecakes win admirers even among the 'I don't like cheesecake' crowd," says Rose Levy Beranbaum. "Yes, they're *that* good."

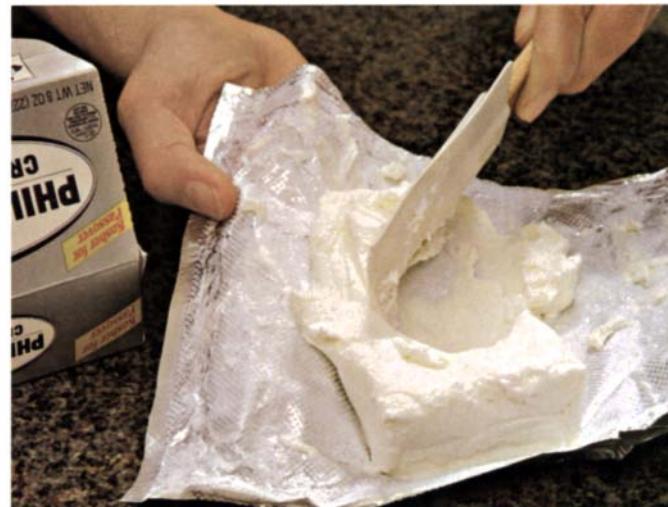
crumbs into the pan so they become a shell for the filling. I like a thin crust that goes almost all the way up the sides of the cake (see the photos below). Another option is to bake the cheesecake without a crust and then pat the cookie crumbs on the sides after chilling. To do this, crush about $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of crumbs. Scoop up some crumbs in one hand, hold the cake on its base in the palm of the other hand, and then, tilting the cake a bit, press the crumbs gently onto the sides.

A water bath prevents curdling

Cheesecakes without added starch are vulnerable to curdling if baked at too high a temperature, so I protect them with a water bath, just as I do with any baked custard. By buffering the cooking, a water bath lets me use a higher temperature without the risk of scrambling the eggs. Cheesecakes baked in cookie crusts are less likely to meet this fate (the crust acts as an insulator), but since they're not invincible, I use a water bath even for them.

Before setting the springform pan in the water bath, wrap it in a double layer of heavy-duty foil to prevent water from seeping into the springform—you'll need extra-wide foil for a 9-inch cake. (If you're using a solid cake pan, skip this step.) The pan holding the water should be a few inches wider than the cheesecake pan and about the same height; if it's too high, it will retard baking. An extra-large cake pan or a roasting pan is perfect for the job. Here's a tip: if the water-bath pan is made of aluminum, dissolve a large pinch of cream of tartar in the water to keep the pan from discoloring.

For the smoothest, creamiest cheesecake, give the oven plenty of time to heat up and use an oven thermometer. You'll notice that my cheesecake



Start with soft, room-temperature cream cheese
to avoid flecks of unblended cheese in the batter.

recipes don't have doneness tests. That's because the oven door must remain closed for a full hour after the heat is turned off. The cheesecake continues baking very gently in the oven's residual heat—opening the door at this point could result in underbaking. Because these recipes depend so heavily on time and temperature rather than visual or tactile doneness cues, it's critical that the oven is completely up to temperature before the cheesecake goes in.

When you do finally remove the cake from the oven, the center will still be jiggly. Don't panic; that's the way it should be. After several hours in the refrigerator, it will firm up and be ready to unmold. Both cheesecakes keep nicely for up to one week in the refrigerator. Freezing, however, would ruin the cheesecake's smooth texture.

Easy steps for a thin cookie crust



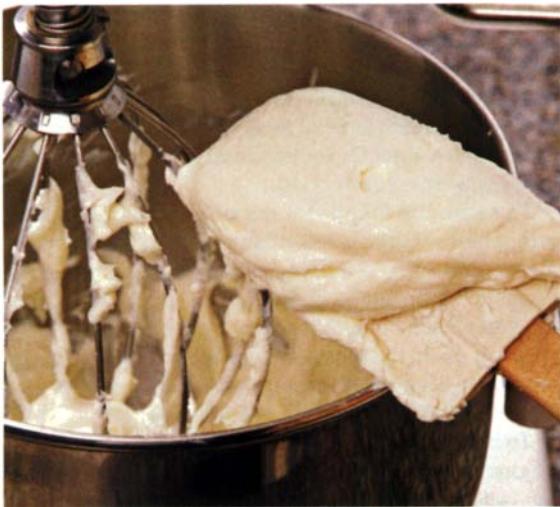
Pat down the crumbs with your fingers and then use a straight-sided glass to press and push the crumbs up the walls.



Cover the crust with a double layer of plastic to prevent sticking and continue spreading the crust with your fingers.



Wrap the pan in a double layer of heavy-duty aluminum foil to prevent leakage.



Use the whisk attachment to mix the cream cheese and sugar until smooth and homogeneous.

RECIPES

Classic Creamy Cheesecake

For a Thanksgiving dessert, I might top this cake with cranberries. Combine 6 Tbs. sugar, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup water, 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. cornstarch, and about 1 cup cranberries in a small saucepan. Bring to a boil, stirring constantly. Reduce the heat, simmer for 5 to 10 min., swirling the pan occasionally. Let cool to room temperature before spooning over the cheesecake. Serves twelve.

FOR THE GRAHAM CRACKER CRUST:

About 11 double graham crackers, broken into pieces (or 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups graham cracker crumbs)

2 Tbs. sugar

5 Tbs. unsalted butter, melted

FOR THE FILLING:

1 lb. cream cheese, softened to room temperature

1 cup sugar

6 large egg yolks

3 Tbs. fresh lemon juice

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. vanilla extract

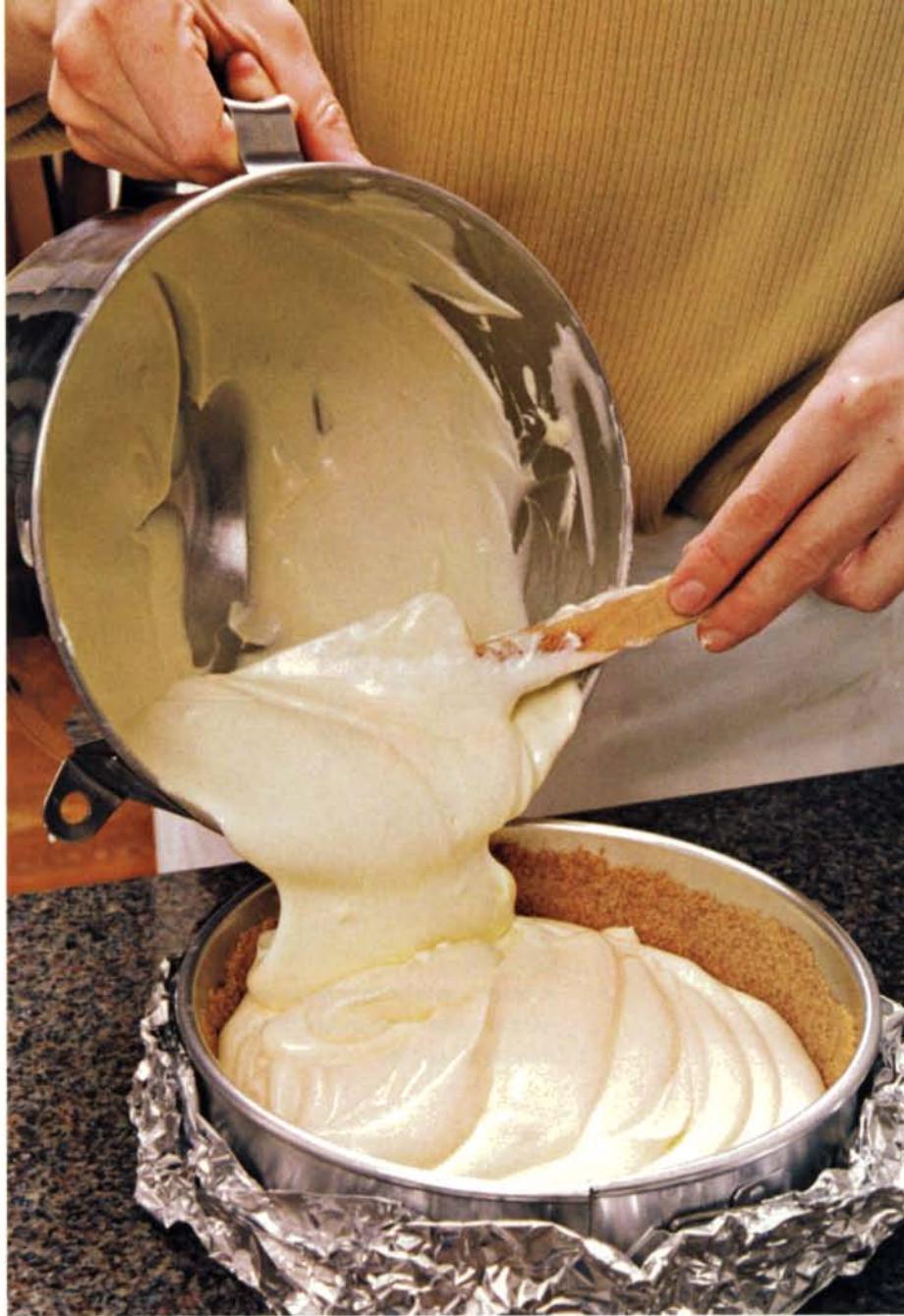
$\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. salt

3 cups sour cream

Heat the oven to 350°F. Grease the bottom and sides of an 8x2 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch or higher springform pan.

To make the crust—In a food processor, process the graham crackers and sugar until the cookies are fine crumbs, about 20 seconds. Add the melted butter and pulse about 10 times just until incorporated. (Alternatively, put the cookies in a freezer bag and use a rolling pin to crush them into fine crumbs. Transfer to a bowl, add the sugar, and toss with a fork to blend. Stir in the melted butter and toss to incorporate.)

Using your fingers or the back of a spoon, press the mixture into the base of the prepared pan and partway up the sides. Use a flat-bottomed, straight-sided glass to smooth the crumbs over the bottom and farther up the sides (but not all the way to the top). Be sure to press the bottom thoroughly so that



Scrape the batter into the prepared springform pan.



Pour hot water into a water bath, bake for 45 minutes, and then turn off the heat and, without opening the oven door, let it cook for another hour.



A brief simmer improves pumpkin's flavor, and a quick whiz in the food processor reduces its fibers to a silken purée.



Without the usual pumpkin-pie spices, the pure mellow taste of pumpkin blends perfectly with the pecan and gingersnap crust in this cheesecake.

the crumbs are evenly distributed. Lay plastic wrap over the crumbs to keep them from sticking to your fingers, and use your fingers to continue pressing the crust to a thin, even layer. Wrap the outside of the pan with a double layer of heavy-duty aluminum foil to prevent leaking. Cover the crust with plastic wrap and refrigerate until needed.

To make the filling—In the large bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, beat the cream cheese and sugar until very smooth, about 3 min., scraping the bowl and beaters as needed. Beat in the egg yolks, beating until the batter is smooth and scraping down the sides as necessary. Add the lemon juice, vanilla, and salt and beat until incorporated. Beat in the sour cream just until blended.

To bake the cheesecake—Pour the batter into the prepared springform pan. Set the pan in a larger pan (a 12x2-inch cake pan or a roasting pan) and surround it with 1 inch of very hot water. Check that the oven is at 350°F and bake the cake for 45 min. Turn off the oven without opening the door and let the cake cool for 1 hour. Transfer the cheesecake to a rack (the center will still be jiggly) and cool to room temperature, about 1 hour. Cover the pan with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 6 hours or overnight. To unmold and slice the cheesecake, see the sidebar at right.

Pumpkin Cheesecake with Gingersnap & Pecan Crust

I discovered just how astonishingly good pumpkin is when not obscured by cinnamon and ginger when I tasted a pumpkin mousse prepared by Jehanne Burch at the Castle Hill Inn & Resort in Newport, Rhode Island. Her mousse contained only pumpkin, sugar, heavy cream, and gelatin. It was a revelation. If you use an electric mixer, start by beating the cream cheese with the whisk attachment until it's very smooth, and then add the cooked pumpkin mixture and the remaining ingredients. *Serves fourteen.*

FOR THE CRUST:

4½ oz. gingersnap cookies (about 17 two-inch cookies), broken into pieces
 2 oz. (½ cup) pecans, toasted
 1 Tbs. sugar
 2 pinches salt
 ½ tsp. ground cinnamon (optional)
 4 Tbs. unsalted butter, melted

FOR THE FILLING:

1 cup unsweetened pumpkin purée (I like Libby's)
 1 cup sugar
 2 cups heavy cream, chilled
 1 lb. cream cheese, softened to room temperature
 2 large eggs
 2 large egg yolks

FOR THE GARNISH:

About 24 pecan halves, toasted

Heat the oven to 350°F. Grease the bottom and sides of a 9x2½-inch or higher springform pan.

To make the crust—In a food processor, process the cookies with the pecans, sugar, salt, and cinnamon (if using) until the cookies become fine crumbs,

about 20 seconds. Add the melted butter and pulse about 10 times, just until incorporated. (Alternatively, put the cookies in a freezer bag and use a rolling pin to crush them into fine crumbs. Grind the nuts finely but not to a powder. In a medium bowl, combine all the crust ingredients except the butter and toss with a fork to blend. Stir in the melted butter and toss to incorporate.)

Using your fingers or the back of a spoon, press the mixture into the base of the prepared pan and partway up the sides. Use a flat-bottomed, straight-sided glass to smooth the crumbs over the bottom and farther up the sides (but not all the way to the top). Be sure to press the bottom thoroughly so that the crumbs are evenly distributed. Lay plastic wrap over the crumbs to keep them from sticking to your fingers, and use your fingers to continue pressing the crust to a thin, even layer. Wrap the outside of the pan with a double layer of heavy-duty aluminum foil to prevent leaking. Cover the crust with plastic wrap and refrigerate until needed.

To make the filling—In a small, heavy saucepan, combine the pumpkin purée and sugar. Over medium heat, bring the mixture to a sputtering simmer, stirring constantly, about 5 min. Turn the heat to low and cook, stirring constantly, until the mixture has darkened and thickened to the consistency of applesauce, about 5 min.

Scrape the mixture into a large food processor and process for 1 min. with the feed tube open (so steam can escape), scraping down the sides. With the motor running, add the chilled cream. Add the softened cream cheese and process for 30 seconds or until smoothly incorporated, scraping down the sides two or three times. Add the eggs and yolks and process for about 5 seconds, just until incorporated.

To bake the cheesecake—Pour the batter into the prepared pan. Set the pan in a larger pan (a 12x2-inch cake pan or a roasting pan) and surround it with 1 inch of very hot water. Check that the oven is at 350°F and bake the cheesecake for 45 min. Turn off the oven without opening the door and let the cheesecake cool for 1 hour. Transfer the cake to a rack (the center will still be jiggly) and cool to room temperature, about 1 hour. Cover the pan with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 6 hours or overnight. To unmold the cheesecake, see the sidebar below.

To garnish the cheesecake—Arrange the pecan halves around the perimeter of the cake. To slice, see the sidebar below.

Rose Levy Beranbaum is the author of *The Cake Bible*, *Rose's Christmas Cookies* (both published by William Morrow), and, more recently, *The Pie & Pastry Bible* (Scribner). ♦

How to unmold a cheesecake without wrecking it

If you've used a springform pan, unmolding can be as easy as removing the ring. To remove the ring cleanly, follow the photos below.

If you want to remove the bottom as well, you'll need to invert the cheesecake twice (if you've used a cake pan instead of a springform, you'll have no choice but to do this). If this is your plan, it's a good idea to

line the bottom of the greased pan with a circle of greased kitchen parchment before baking.

Before unmolding the sides and bottom, be sure the cheesecake is thoroughly chilled (at least six hours in the refrigerator). Have ready a serving plate and another flat plate that's at least as wide as the springform and covered with plastic wrap. Remove the

ring following the photos below. Set the plate with plastic wrap on top of the cheesecake and carefully invert the pan. Heat the base of the springform with a hot, damp cloth or a hair dryer, and lift it off. Peel away the parchment, if used. Set the serving plate lightly on the bottom of the cheesecake (which is now facing up), and reinvert the cake. Lift off the plastic-wrapped plate. If the

cheesecake was baked without a crust, you may need to smooth the sides with a metal spatula.

To cut neat slices, use a sharp, thin-bladed knife dipped in hot water (shake off excess drops) between each slice. For a cheesecake without a crust, a piece of dental floss, held taut, also works (you'll need to cut across the diameter of the cake).



Wipe a hot, damp cloth around the outside of the ring (or use a hair dryer).



Run a metal spatula or a thin knife inside the ring.



Release and gently loosen the ring and then lift it off.

Cheesecake 101

You may not have realized it, but cheesecakes are just custards that happen to be made with cream cheese instead of milk. And like custards, there are two major categories of cheesecake—those with starch and those without. Adding starch to cheesecakes, or to any custard, affects both the cooking method and the texture, making it firmer and less likely to curdle or weep.

Without starch, cheesecakes are creamy

The texture of a cheesecake without starch is quite smooth and, if the batter contains sour cream, it's also incredibly creamy: a sensuous, luxurious combination that's perfect for a rich dessert cheesecake (see the recipes on pp. 67–69).

Without starch, cheesecakes rely on eggs for their thickening power. Thickening occurs when raw egg proteins unwind and link together, which is what happens when eggs cook. Also, emulsifiers in the egg yolk—lecithin and lipoproteins—help give the cheesecake a smooth texture.

Like other custards without starch, cheesecakes need gentle heat to prevent curdling. A little heat cooks the proteins just enough to make them loosely link together to form a thick but smooth texture; but beyond a certain heat threshold, the proteins tighten up and form curds. As with *crème anglaise* (a boiled custard), which must be stirred constantly over very low heat, a cheesecake without starch must be baked very gently and evenly to avoid curdling.

There are several ways to shield a cheesecake without starch against too much heat. Betsy Murrelle, a cookware shop owner in Banner Elk, North Carolina (and an outstanding cook), bakes her cheesecakes in a 275°F oven for one hour, and then leaves them in the turned-off oven for another hour. My friend Doris Koplin, a professional baker and cheesecake expert, bakes her cheesecake without starch at 350°F for 30 minutes (just enough time to get the batter hot) and then she turns off the heat and leaves the cheesecake in the closed oven for about an hour to continue cooking very slowly.

Another method is to bake the cheesecake in a water bath. In a 350°F oven, the temperature in a water bath will hover around 200°F, which allows the custard to set without curdling.

Cheesecakes with starch set up firm

When you add cornstarch or flour to cheesecake, the texture becomes firmer and coarser—maybe not ideal for a dessert, but I find it quite appropriate for a savory cheesecake. The thickening occurs when the granules of starch are heated, which causes them to swell and eventually pop, releasing their contents and creating a tangled network of molecules (for details on how starch thickens, see *Fine Cooking* #5, p. 18).

Starch in the batter affects the method of cooking. Just as *crème pâtissière* (pastry cream), which is essentially a *crème anglaise* plus starch, can be



This Grand Canyon crack, which formed after refrigeration, indicates that the cheesecake spent too much time in the oven.

cooked over direct medium-low heat without curdling, so can a cheesecake with starch be cooked without a water bath in a moderately hot oven.

In this case, the starch protects the eggs from scrambling by preventing egg coagulation. How? I lean toward a theory that swollen starch granules physically “get in the way” of the linking egg proteins, thereby slowing down coagulation. Whatever the mechanism, the presence of starch means you can safely cook cheesecake at 325°F for up to an hour without a water bath, just as you can bring *crème pâtissière* to a boil without fear of curdling.

Why cheesecakes crack

The question I'm asked most frequently about cheesecakes is “Why did my cheesecake crack?” It's difficult for cooks to believe my answer: it's overcooked. “That can't be,” the cook protests. “The center jiggled a tiny bit, as if it weren't done.” That's true when the cake is hot, but examine it after chilling and you'll see that it's firm and dry right around the crack. Overcooking causes proteins to shrink and the cake to dry out, leading to cracks.

I think that judging cheesecake doneness is one of the most deceptive and disconcerting things in cooking. I've made Rose Levy Beranbaum's cheesecakes successfully many times, and every time there's a section in the center, at least three inches in diameter, that wobbles wildly as if it were totally runny inside. I'm always amazed that after chilling, the cake is perfectly cooked.

The simplest way to avoid cracks is to shorten the cooking time, but you also can play with other variables. Sugar slows cooking by blocking the coagulation of proteins, so adding more provides an extra barrier against overcooking. Another option is to cut an egg out of the recipe. Fewer eggs means fewer proteins, a slower rate of coagulation, and slower cooking.

If the unmentionable does occur and you end up with minor fissures in the cake, do what my baker friend Doris does: ice the cake with whipped cream, and no one will ever know the difference.

Shirley O. Corriher, a food scientist and a contributing editor to *Fine Cooking*, wrote the award-winning *CookWise* (William Morrow). ♦