Bringing Back Baked Alaska

LISA McMANUS, FOOD SCIENTIST, AND CHARLES KELLY, CHEF

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 2, 2021

ILLUSTRATIONS: CHRISTIAN BILLIN-FRZEN, CHARLES BAUSMAN, AND CHRIS PAPPAS

FRENCH MERINGUE

FRUITY DESSERTS

RECIPE DEVELOPMENT

SUMMER

WHAT SUCCEEDS WHOLE LOOKS LIKE:

- **Not overly sweet**
- **Easy to slice**
- **Meringue and ice cream that hold together**

My goal was to remember what makes it so wonderful so that it is enjoyable to eat as it is improvised in kitchens.

WATCH EXPERT TIPS

WATCH EXPERT TIPS

The classic cake, ice cream, and meringue combo is a serious organizational nightmare. It's also, for some, less—never ice cream is your first choice—but it's still a tough ask.

Bombes That Bombed

My first move was to pick a side of meringue.

MOVE: Type of Meringue

Organ French, Italian, or Swiss. The drawbacks of the French and Italian are that they are unstable (French) and time-consuming (Italian) and I prefer the other styles because the virtues of meringue are well-established. The results are not only tasty, but also tender, chewy, and, more stable.

Swiss it is. Once the Swiss version, which is a bit easier to make. The basic method is to gently heat egg whites and sugar in a heat-safe mixing bowl, then whip the mixture to stiff peaks. Unlike French meringue, which is made with cold egg whites, Swiss meringue is more stable and tolerant of overbeating.

As for the cake, Baked Alaska can be made with anything from a dense and rich gateau to a rich and moist yellow cake. I'm a fan of the latter, because it's easier to make and because it's more tender and true to the meringue. Inching with the gateau, I wanted to make sure that the cake's flavor became a 6.5 (much more interesting than a 2 or 3) and that it was a little chewy-crispy. Good luck with that. Ultimately, I ended up with a cake that I served with chocolate mousse, which I made because it's easy, and it's a dessert that I like. Plus, the ice cream was where I wanted to concentrate the cake and control the flavor. I made a chocolate-hazelnut cake, which was tasty, but it was a little too rich. Dry down the surface of the ice cream with a spatula, and it's time to go. It's a pretty cute pie-in-a-time-machine and it's ready for your close-up.

Foam Sweet Foam

MOVE: Avoid Whipped Egg Whites

Lesson learned. That whipped-egg-white meringue can't (does not) be another in a Pompeii-like preservation. The meringue protects the ice cream at the expense of the cake, which is the worst thing.

Here's how it works. When egg whites are beaten, they form a foam—a liquid mixture with bubbles of air. Foam contains trapped millions of tiny air bubbles and holds them together in a wet-sand-like fashion. Egg foams make great insulation because the air bubbles are surrounded by a thin film of protein that holds the liquid firmly in place. The more meringue I used, the better the insulation effect.

If I couldn't reduce the amount of meringue, I could at least make it lighter. I was intrigued by a recipe for a meringue made with egg whites and sugar, but no yolks, not replicating the meringue only meringue-and-sugar-based Swiss meringue. It tasted tasty. It totally make a difference. I'd found a lighter meringue, which I could use to insulate the cake. Because this compromised insulation problem. Or so I thought.

Pressure cooker, cookie sheet, and parchment paper are all necessary for a Fusco dogbone, lefties at curves. Clockwise, cookie sheet, parchment paper, pressure cooker, turn-table, oil, fermentation mass.

Dentist's Tiny Mirror

Macaroons and dam sugar mus varius blandit sit amet non magna. Cupcake dragée tempus pudding. Macaroon. Macaroon. Macaroon

TRY A FREE TRIAL ISSUE of Cook's Illustrated Magazine!

FREE ISSUE

SAVE

Bringing Back Baked Alaska

BY ANDREA GEARY | PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 2013

RECIPE DEVELOPMENT | RECIPE

EASY

WATCH EVERY STEP

The classic cake, ice cream, and meringue combo is a science experiment you can eat. Our modern, less-sweet version is one you'll actually enjoy.

WHAT SUCCESS WOULD LOOK LIKE

- Not overly sweet
- Easy to slice
- Meringue and ice cream that hold together

My goal was to reengineer Baked Alaska so it would be as enjoyable to eat as it is impressive to behold.

Baked Alaska is the unicorn of the dessert world, everyone has heard of it, but few have seen one in real life. Maybe that's because its three components—a circle of cake topped with a dome of ice cream and covered in meringue—make it sound too fussy to cobble together at home. Or maybe Baked Alaska seems intimidating since it appears to defy the law of physics. Baking this dessert in a setup hot oven browns and crisps the billowy meringue exterior while leaving the ice cream core frozen and firm. Some restaurants further heighten the drama by lowering the lights, dousing the creation with liqueur, and setting it ablaze at the table.

That said, the dessert is still basically a dressed-up ice cream cake, and it's no more difficult to make than any other version. My own reasons for not throwing one together more often have always been that Baked Alaska is very sweet, and the traditional bombe shape—while visually impressive when whole—is difficult to slice and serve neatly. Even if you do manage to cut neat slices, the meringue and ice cream invariably part company when you move the slices from the platter to dessert plates. My goal was to reengineer Baked Alaska so it would be as enjoyable to eat as it is impressive to behold.

TYPES OF MERINGUE

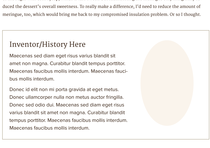
There are three types of meringue: Italian, in which a hot sugar syrup is poured into the egg whites as they are beaten; Swiss, which heats the whites with the sugar in a bowl over simmering water and then whipped; and French, in which the whites are whipped with sugar alone.

Bombes That Bombed

RECIPE
Baked Alaska

My first move was to pick a style of meringue: French, Italian, or Swiss. The dowdy kind are that the egg whites don't fully cook and the result is relatively coarse and other styles because the eggs are fully cooked and the sugar completely dissolved. The results are not only food-safe, but also creamier, denser, and more stable.

Ultimately, I chose the Swiss version, which is a bit easier to make. The basic method is to gently whisk egg whites and sugar in a bowl over simmering water until the mixture reaches 160 degrees and then whip the mixture in a stand-mixer until stiff peaks form.



Present commodo cursus magna, vel scelerisque nisl consectetur et. Fusce dapibus, tellus ac cursus commodo, tortor mauris condimentum nibh, ut fermentum massa.

As for the cake, Baked Alaska can be made with anything from a lean and airy genoise to a rich and tender pound cake to a brownie. I thought that the brownie sounded like a nice flavor and visual contrast to the meringue. Sticking with the traditional bombe shape for now, I baked a basic brownie in a 8-inch round pan and packed softened vanilla ice cream into a plastic wrap–lined bowl with the same diameter. To form the ice cream cake, I pressed the cooled brownie round onto the ice cream and popped the whole thing in the freezer. Once it was firm, I unmolded the cake and covered the surface with a thick layer of meringue (which was tricky, because it tended to slip down the surface of the ice cream). Finally, I baked the Alaska in a 500-degree oven for just a few minutes until the exterior was brown and crisp.

I was right—everyone liked the chocolate flavor and visual contrast of the brownie, but in combination with the ice cream and that thick coat of meringue, the whole package was much too sweet. Plus, the ice cream turned icy when I refrose it before baking. Decreasing the amount of meringue reduced some of that sweetness but doing so came at a cost. When I baked off another Alaska covered with about half as much meringue, the ice cream core turned to soft-serve.

Foam Sweet Foam

Lesson learned: That voluminous meringue coat isn't there just for aesthetics. Its primary function is insulation. The meringue protects the ice cream at the center from melting in the heat of the oven.

Here's how it works: When egg whites are beaten, they form a foam—a liquid (egg whites are primarily water) that traps millions of tiny air bubbles and holds them together in a solid shape. Egg foams make great insulators because the air bubbles contain relatively few molecules and thus conduct heat energy poorly. The more meringue I used, the better the insulation would be.

INSIDE WHIPPED EGG WHITES

Air bubbles whipped into the egg whites are coated with the protein egg proteins to stabilize them.

More Science >

If I couldn't reduce the amount of meringue, maybe I could at least make it less sweet by replacing 1/4 of the sugar with corn syrup, which is less sweet. But recalibrating the meringue only marginally reduced the dessert's overall sweetness. To really make a difference, I'd need to reduce the amount of meringue, too, which would bring me back to my compromised insulation problem. Or so I thought.

Inventor/History Here

Maecenas sed diam eget risus varius blandit sit amet non magna. Curabitur blandit tempus porttitor. Maecenas faucibus mollis interdum. Maecenas faucibus mollis interdum.

Donec id elit non mi porta gravida at eget metus. Donec ullamcorper nulla non metus auctor fringilla. Donec sed odio dui. Maecenas sed diam eget risus varius blandit sit amet non magna. Curabitur blandit tempus porttitor. Maecenas faucibus mollis interdum. Maecenas faucibus mollis interdum.

Splendid Insulation

Up until that point, I'd been relying almost exclusively on the meringue for insulation. But cakes are also foams with the ability to insulate, so maybe I could make better use of that component. I'd actually seen a couple of Baked Alaska recipes in which the ice cream was completely encased in cake and had dismissed them as overkill. Now I recognized this as a potentially genius move that would allow me to cut way back on the meringue while keeping the ice cream well insulated.

But in order to do so, I had to make some changes—starting with the type of cake. The brownie was not only too sweet but also too inflexible to encase the ice cream, so I switched to a chiffon cake. Because this cake is made with whipped egg whites, it's not only spongier and more flexible than a brownie but also contains much more air, making it a better insulator. (Its plain flavor wasn't an incentive, but I'd revisit that later).

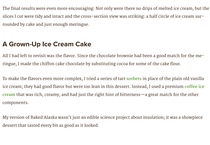
Present commodo cursus magna, vel scelerisque nisl consectetur et. Fusce dapibus, tellus ac cursus commodo, tortor mauris condimentum nibh, ut fermentum massa.

Using the more-resilient chiffon cake also allowed me to change the way I engineered my Baked Alaska. Rather than line a bowl with cake pieces and soft ice cream, which always resulted in icy ice cream and messy slicing, I abandoned the bombe shape and instead turned the ice cream into a cylinder and wrapped cake around it.

Don't Try This at Home

Maecenas sed diam eget risus varius blandit sit amet non magna. Curabitur blandit tempus porttitor. Maecenas faucibus mollis interdum. Maecenas faucibus mollis interdum.

Donec id elit non mi porta gravida at eget metus. Donec ullamcorper nulla non metus auctor fringilla. Donec sed odio dui. Maecenas sed diam eget risus varius blandit sit amet non magna. Curabitur blandit tempus porttitor. Maecenas faucibus mollis interdum. Maecenas faucibus mollis interdum.



Present commodo cursus magna, vel scelerisque nisl consectetur et. Fusce dapibus, tellus ac cursus commodo, tortor mauris condimentum nibh, ut fermentum massa.

Now I recognized this as a potentially genius move that would allow me to cut way back on the meringue while keeping the ice cream well insulated.

First, I cut the cardboard-off two pint containers of ice cream, pressed them together to form a cylinder, and stashed it in the freezer. To make a wide, flat cake that could be wrapped around the cylinder, I baked the chiffon batter in a rimmed baking sheet, cutting the cake into pieces that I used to encase the ice cream. I halved the cylinder lengthwise, placed the halves cut side down on another piece of cake, and placed my creation on a wire rack set in a rimmed baking sheet (to separate it from the sheet's surface, which would get hot in the oven). I spread the cake with just two inches of meringue, appreciating how much better it clung to the surface of the cake than it had to the ice cream, and baked it.

The final results were even more encouraging: Not only were there no drips of melted ice cream, but the slices I cut were tidy and intact and the cross-section view was striking: A half circle of ice cream surrounded by cake and just enough meringue.

A Grown-Up Ice Cream Cake

Ah! I had left to revisit was the flavor. Since the chocolate brownie had been a good match for the meringue, I made the chiffon cake chocolate by substituting cocoa for some of the cake flour.

To make the flavors even more complex, I tried a series of tart sorbets in place of the plain old vanilla ice cream; they had good flavor but were too lean in this dessert. Instead, I used a premium coffee ice cream that was rich, creamy, and had just the right hint of bitterness—a great match for the other components.

My version of Baked Alaska wasn't just an edible science project about insulation; it was a showpiece dessert that turned every bit as good as it looked.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- **Intense chocolate flavor**
  A combination of unsweetened & semisweet chocolate with cocoa powder makes for a chocolate flavor with depth and complexity.
- **Not overly sweet**
  Finding the right balance of unsweetened & semisweet chocolate as well as the perfect amount of sugar created spot-on flavor.
- **Chewy, fudgy texture**
  Melting butter, rather than creaming it with sugar and eggs, makes for a dense, fudgy texture.

GET THE RECIPE

http://cc.bz/0ln4ccf

Ice Cream, Dessert, Baking, Andrea Geary

More from Cook's Illustrated

RECIPE
The Best Ice Cream Sandwiches

MENU
Favorite Chocolate Desserts

RECIPE
Bananas Foster

RECIPE
Vanilla Ice Cream

TASTE TEST
Chocolate Ice Cream

EQUIPMENT REVIEW
Square Cake Pans

EQUIPMENT REVIEW
All-Purpose Whisks

COOK'S COUNTRY
Ice Cream Cupcakes

SUBSCRIBE TO COOK'S

© 2014 America's Test Kitchen
All rights reserved.

WEBSITES
America's Test Kitchen
Cook's Illustrated
Cooks Country
Online Cooking School
Cook's Blog
Test Feed

MAGAZINES
Cook's Illustrated
Cooks Country
Digital Editions

CUSTOMER SERVICE
Renewals FAQs
Customer FAQs
Contact Us

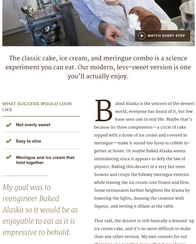
CORPORATE
About Us
Careers
Personnel Policy
Job Opportunities
Cooks Illustrated Brand
Media Center

Bringing Back Baked Alaska

BY ANDREA GLASS / PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 2015

Get a FREE TRIAL ISSUE of Cook's Illustrated Magazine! FREE TRIAL

RECIPE DEVELOPMENT RECIPE



The classic cake, ice cream, and meringue combo is a science experiment you can eat. Our modern, less-sweet version is one you'll actually enjoy.

WHAT SUCCESS WOULD LOOK LIKE

- **Not overly sweet**
- **Easy to slice**
- **Meringue and ice cream that hold together**

My goal was to reengineer Baked Alaska so it would be as enjoyable to eat as it is impressive to behold.

Baked Alaska is the unicorn of the dessert world, everyone has heard of it, but few have seen one in real life. Maybe that's because its three components—a circle of cake topped with a dome of ice cream and covered in meringue—make it sound too funky to cobble together at home. Or maybe Baked Alaska seems intimidating since it appears to defy the law of physics. Baking this dessert in a very hot oven browns and crisps the billowy meringue exterior while keeping the ice cream cute frozen and firm. Some restaurants further heighten the drama by lowering the lights, dousing the creation with liquor, and setting it ablaze at the table.

That said, the dessert is still basically a dressed-up ice cream cake, and it's no more difficult to make than any other version. My own reasons for not throwing one together more often have always been that Baked Alaska is very sweet, and the traditional bombe shape—while visually impressive—is a bit of a pain to slice and serve neatly. Even if you can keep the meringue and ice cream invariably slipping and sliding off slices from the platter to dessert plates, Baked Alaska isn't would be as enjoyable to eat as it is impressive to behold.

Bombes That Bombed

TYPES OF MERINGUE

My first move was to pick a style of meringue: French, Italian, or Swiss. The drawbacks of the French kind are that the egg whites don't fully cook and the result is relatively coarse and foamy. I prefer the other styles because the eggs are fully cooked and the sugar completely dissolved. The results are not only food-safe, but also creamier, denser, and more stable.

There are three types of meringue: French, made by whipping a hot sugar syrup poured into the egg whites as they are beaten; Swiss, which heats the whites with the sugar; and Italian, in which egg whites are whipped with sugar alone.

Ultimately, I chose the Swiss version, which is a bit easier to make. The basic method is to gently whisk egg whites and sugar in a bowl over simmering water until the mixture reaches 160 degrees and then whip the mixture in a stand mixer until stiff peaks form.

Prasesent commodo cursus magna, vel scelerisque nisl consectetur et. Fusce dapibus, tellus ac cursus commodo, tortor mauris condimentum nibh, ut fermentum massa.

As for the cake, Baked Alaska can be made with anything from a lean and airy genoise to a rich and tender pound cake to a brownie. I thought that the brownie sounded like a nice flavor and visual contrast to the meringue. Sticking with the traditional bombe shape for now, I baked a basic brownie in a 9-inch round pan and packed softened vanilla ice cream into a plastic wrap-lined bowl with the same diameter. To form the ice cream cake, I poured the cooled brownie round over the ice cream and popped the whole thing in the freezer. Once it was firm, I unmolded the cake and covered the surface with a thick layer of meringue (which was tricky, because it tended to slip down the surface of the ice cream). Finally, I baked the Alaska in a 500-degree oven for just a few minutes until the exterior was brown and crisp.

I was right—everyone liked the chocolate flavor and visual contrast of the brownie, but in combination with the ice cream and that thick coat of meringue, the whole package was much too sweet. Plus, the ice cream turned icy when I reduced it before baking. Decreasing the amount of meringue reduced some of that sweetness but doing so came at a cost. When I baked off another Alaska covered with about half as much meringue, the ice cream core turned to soft-serve.

Foam Sweet Foam

INSIDE WHIPPED EGG WHITES

At bubbles whipped into the egg whites are coated with the unfurled egg proteins to make a foam.

More Science +

Lesson learned: That voluminous meringue coat isn't there just for aesthetics. Its primary function is insulation. The meringue protects the ice cream at the center from melting in the heat of the oven.

Here's how it works: When egg whites are beaten, they form a foam—a liquid (egg whites) are primarily water) that traps millions of tiny air bubbles and holds them together in a solid shape. Egg foams make great insulators because the air bubbles contain relatively few molecules and thus conduct heat energy poorly. The more meringue I used, the better the insulation would be.

If I couldn't reduce the amount of meringue, maybe I could at least make it less sweet by replacing 25 of the sugar with corn syrup, which is less sweet. But recalibrating the meringue only marginally reduced the dessert's overall sweetness. To really make a difference, I'd need to reduce the amount of meringue, too, which would bring me back to my compromised insulation problem. Or so I thought.

Inventor/History Here

Maecenas sed diam eget risus varius blandit sit amet non magna. Curabitur blandit tempus porttitor. Maecenas fauctibus mollis interdum. Maecenas fauctibus mollis interdum.

Donec id elit non mi porta gravida at eget metus. Donec ullamcorper nulla non metus auctor fringilla. Donec sed odio dui. Maecenas sed diam eget risus varius blandit sit amet non magna. Curabitur blandit tempus porttitor. Maecenas fauctibus mollis interdum. Maecenas fauctibus mollis interdum.

Splendid Insulation

Up until that point, I'd been relying almost exclusively on the meringue for insulation. But cakes are also foams with the ability to insulate, so maybe I could make better use of that component. I'd actually seen a couple of Baked Alaska recipes in which the ice cream was completely encased in cake and had dismissed them as overkill. Now I recognized this as a potentially genius move that would allow me to cut way back on the meringue while keeping the ice cream well insulated.

But in order to do so, I had to make some changes—starting with the type of cake. The brownie was not only too sweet but also too inflexible to encase the ice cream, so I switched to a chiffon cake. Because this cake is made with whipped egg whites, it's not only sponger and more flexible than a brownie but also contains much more air, making it a better insulator. (Its plain flavor wasn't an incentive, but I'd revisit that later.)

Prasesent commodo cursus magna, vel scelerisque nisl consectetur et. Fusce dapibus, tellus ac cursus commodo, tortor mauris condimentum nibh, ut fermentum massa.

Using the more-resilient chiffon cake also allowed me to change the way I engineered my Baked Alaska. Rather than line a bowl with cake pieces and soft ice cream, which always resulted in icy ice cream and messy slicing, I abandoned the bombe shape and instead turned the ice cream into a cylinder and wrapped cake around it.

Don't Try This at Home

Maecenas sed diam eget risus varius blandit sit amet non magna. Curabitur blandit tempus porttitor. Maecenas fauctibus mollis interdum. Maecenas fauctibus mollis interdum.

Donec id elit non mi porta gravida at eget metus. Donec ullamcorper nulla non metus auctor fringilla. Donec sed odio dui. Maecenas sed diam eget risus varius blandit sit amet non magna. Curabitur blandit tempus porttitor. Maecenas fauctibus mollis interdum. Maecenas fauctibus mollis interdum.

Prasesent commodo cursus magna, vel scelerisque nisl consectetur et. Fusce dapibus, tellus ac cursus commodo, tortor mauris condimentum nibh, ut fermentum massa.

Now I recognized this as a potentially genius move that would allow me to cut way back on the meringue while keeping the ice cream well insulated.

First, I cut the cardboard off two pint containers of ice cream, pressed them together to form a cylinder, and stashed it in the freezer. To make a wide, flat cake that could be wrapped around the cylinder, I baked the chiffon batter in a rimmed baking sheet, cutting the cake into pieces that I used to encase the ice cream. I baked the cylinder lengthwise, placed the halves cut side down on another piece of cake, and placed my creation on a wire rack set in a rimmed baking sheet (to separate it from the sheet's surface, which would get hot in the oven). I spread the cake with just two inches of meringue, appreciating how much better it clung to the surface of the cake than it had to the ice cream, and baked it.

The final results were even more encouraging: Not only were there no drips of melted ice cream, but the slices I cut were tidy and intact and the cross-section view was striking: a half circle of ice cream surrounded by cake and just enough meringue.

A Grown-Up Ice Cream Cake

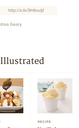
Sci I had left to revisit was the flavor. Since the chocolate brownie had been a good match for the meringue, I made the chiffon cake chocolate by substituting cocoa for some of the cake flour.

To make the flavors even more complex, I tried a series of tart sorbets in place of the plain old vanilla ice cream, they had good flavor but were too lean in this dessert. Instead, I used a premium coffee ice cream that was rich, creamy, and had just the right hint of bitterness—a great match for the other components.

My version of Baked Alaska wasn't just an edible science project about insulation, it was a showpiece dessert that tasted every bit as good as it looked.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- **Intense chocolate flavor**
  A combination of unsweetened & semisweet chocolate with cocoa powder makes for a chocolate flavor with depth and complexity.
- **Not overly sweet**
  Finding the right balance of unsweetened & semisweet chocolate as well as the perfect amount of sugar created spot-on flavor.
- **Chewy, fudgy texture**
  Melting butter, rather than creaming it with sugar and eggs, makes for a dense, fudgy texture.



GET THE RECIPE

http://ac.hr/BHcwzF

Ice Cream, Dessert, Baking, Andrew Geary

More from Cook's Illustrated

RECIPE
The Best Ice Cream Sandwiches

MENU
Favorite Chocolate Desserts

RECIPE
Bananas Foster

RECIPE
Vanilla Ice Cream

TASTE TEST
Chocolate Ice Cream

EQUIPMENT REVIEW
Square Cake Pans

EQUIPMENT REVIEW
All-Purpose Whisks

COOK'S COUNTRY
Ice Cream Cupcakes