

MIDNIGHT TRAIN TO MARRAKESH CUPCAKES (SPICED CHOCOLATE CUPCAKES WITH GANACHE AND PEPPERED ALMONDS)

INGREDIENTS

for the almonds

1/2 cup water
1 cup granulated sugar
1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
2 cups whole raw almonds

for the cupcakes

4 1/2 ounces high-quality bittersweet chocolate, finely chopped
9 tablespoons (1 stick plus 1 tablespoon) unsalted butter, room temperature
1 cup confectioners' sugar
6 large eggs, separated, at room temperature
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/2 cup granulated sugar
1 cup all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon ground ginger
1 teaspoon ground clove
1 teaspoon ground cardamom

for the ganache

1/2 pound dark chocolate, chopped (or high quality chips)
3/4 cup heavy cream
1 tablespoon light corn syrup

Additionally:

Mild chili strands (optional)

DIRECTIONS

First make your almonds. These can be made up to 3 days in advance. Cover a cookie sheet with a silpat mat, or with foil sprayed with nonstick cooking spray.

In a medium saucepan, combine the water, sugar and cayenne over high heat. Stir until the sugar dissolves, then bring the mixture to a boil. Add the almonds and reduce the heat to medium. Stir frequently until the sugar crystallizes around the almonds. This should take 5-8 minutes and it will look like a mess and that you have made a mistake. It will be difficult to stir, but continue stirring, and eventually the sugar will start to re-melt. It will turn a deep golden brown color and coat the almonds. Trust me... just keep stirring. Once the sugar is caramelized and completely liquid, pour the almonds out onto the prepared baking sheet. Use a fork to separate the nuts while the sugar is still liquid. Do not touch the almonds with fingers or even think of popping one in your mouth at this point. They are screaming hot and the sugar will leave nasty burns if you are not careful. Let the almonds set at room temperature. Once cool and hard, break them apart if necessary.

For the cupcakes, preheat oven to 400F. Prepare a cupcake / muffin pan with liners. In a medium work bowl, whisk together flour, ginger, clove and cardamom.

In the top part of a double boiler over very hot, but not simmering, water, or in a microwave at medium power, melt the chocolate. Remove from the heat or the oven, and let stand, stirring often, until cool. Beat the butter in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle blade on medium-high speed until smooth, about 1 minute. On low speed, beat in the confectioners' sugar. Return the speed to medium-high and beat until light in color and texture, about 2 minutes. Beat in the egg yolks, one at a time, scraping down the sides of the bowl. Beat in the chocolate and vanilla.

Beat the egg whites and granulated sugar in a large bowl with an electric mixer on high speed just until they form soft, shiny peaks. Do not overbeat. Stir about one fourth of the beaten whites into the chocolate mixture to lighten it, then fold in the remaining whites, leaving a few visible wisps of whites. Sift half of the flour-spice mixture over the chocolate mixture, and fold in with a rubber spatula. Repeat with the remaining flour.

Fill the lined muffin cups three-quarters full, being careful not to overfill. Bake until a toothpick inserted in the center of the cupcake comes out clean, about 20-22 minutes. Cool the cupcakes in the pan for 5 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack to cool completely.

Finally, make the ganache and assemble / decorate. To make the ganache, place the chocolate and corn syrup into a medium bowl. Heat the cream in a small sauce pan over medium heat. Bring just to a boil, then pour over the chopped chocolate, and whisk until smooth. Let cool for 3-4 minutes and then dip each cupcake into the ganache. Top with almonds and chili strands. Let cool for a bit to have the chocolate firm up (do not refrigerate).