

Rhubarb Compote in Meringue Nests



Nothing says spring like rhubarb, one of nature's tonics. Rhubarb compote is easy to make, stores well, and can be spooned onto ice cream or yogurt, over a piece of vanilla cake, or tucked under French vanilla pudding. Here it sits on a meringue nest filled with Chantilly cream—a fancy way of saying whipped cream sweetened with sugar and vanilla.

Meringue Nests

INGREDIENTS

4 egg whites (½ cup) at room temperature

¼ TSP salt

½ TSP cream of tartar

1 TSP vinegar (white or cider)

1 ¼ CUPS granulated sugar

1 TSP vanilla

NOTE: The vinegar and cream of tartar are essential, though often missing from contemporary recipes. The acid breaks down the coils of amino acids into long strands that create the stable foam necessary for nests to hold their shape.

MAKES 8 TO 10 NESTS
(MERINGUES STORE WELL FOR FUTURE USE)

METHOD

Preheat oven to very low: 200 or 225F. Cover baking sheet with parchment. Using the bottom of a round glass, draw 3-inch circles, evenly spaced.

Turn egg whites into the bowl of a stand mixer or use an electric hand mixer. Sprinkle salt over egg whites. Beat on low speed until the whites are foamy, 3-4 minutes. Continue to beat, sifting in the cream of tartar, then drizzle in vinegar.

Shift to medium speed, continue to beat while slowly pouring in the sugar. Increase speed to high and beat until the meringue is so stiff it crawls up the beater. Peaks should stay stiff as a cedar waxwing's crest. Beat in the vanilla.

Using a rubber spatula, scrape the meringue into a large pastry bag fitted with a star attachment. Start at the centre of each circle and pipe meringue around and around to make the bottom of the nest, then continue around the edge, piping 3 or 4 layers high. Too high and the meringues are likely to collapse in the oven.

Or smooth a half-inch layer of meringue within each circle for the base, then drop meringue by the spoonful to create the sides, using a spoon and the back of the spatula to shape the nests.

Slide the tray into the oven and bake about an hour. Meringues should not be at all sticky to the touch; if necessary, bake another 30 minutes. Do not allow meringues to turn beige.

Turn off the oven and leave the meringues in for a half hour or overnight. Store in an airtight container in a cool, dry place (not the refrigerator). They keep well for weeks, and if frozen, for months. In damp weather they may lose their crispness. To restore, warm oven to 100°F, turn it off and place meringues inside until dry and crisp.

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Rhubarb Compote

INGREDIENTS

2 LBS fresh rhubarb, sliced about one inch

½ CUP water (or less depending on freshness of fruit)

¾ CUP granulated sugar (or less if you like it tart)

½ TSP vanilla extract

1-INCH piece fresh, peeled ginger

MAKES 4 CUPS

METHOD

Add rhubarb and sugar to a saucepan, stir together, and let sit without heat for 10 minutes or so until the fruit begins to release its juices.

Add about half the water and bring to a boil over medium heat, stirring constantly. Add more water as necessary. Reduce heat and simmer, stirring occasionally, for about 5 minutes or until much of the rhubarb has broken down and some remains whole and tender. Stir in vanilla and set aside to cool.

Peel and grate the ginger with a microplane or very fine grater. Scrape gratings into a fine-mesh sieve set over a small bowl. Press down firmly with a spoon until juices release. You should get about a teaspoon of juice. Stir ginger juice into rhubarb mixture. Refrigerate until ready to use.

NOTE: Finely sliced candied ginger makes a spicy garnish. Rhubarb also marries well with orange zest or Cointreau, or anise flavours like Pernod. For a compote as pink and lovely as a rosy purple finch, choose the reddest rhubarb in the patch, or stew raspberries in a tiny bit of water to release their juices and add a few red drops to the compote.

TO SERVE: Whip a cup of whipping cream until stiff. Stir in a tablespoon of sugar and ½ teaspoon of vanilla. Fill the meringue nests with compote, cover with cream, and spoon a dollop of compote on top. Serve immediately.