

Lemon Meringue Tart, The Most Extraordinary

a recipe from www.maureenabood.com

This tart has three main elements: the crust, the curd, and the meringue. Both the crust dough and the curd can be made in advance and then assembled, but the meringue must be made the day the tart is served. Meringue can be piped on the tart or spooned on in easy swirls. Or not at all! This tart is just as delicious without the meringue. The lemon curd is based on a recipe for "The Most Extraordinary Lemon Tart" by the great Dori Greenspan. She calls the curd "lemon cream"; it can be refrigerated for four days and frozen for up to two months prior to assembling in the tart crust.

For the crust:

1 2/3 cups unbleached, all-purpose flour
1/4 cup sugar
1/4 cup slivered almonds
10 tablespoons (1 1/4 sticks) chilled unsalted butter, cut into 1/2-inch cubes
1 large egg, lightly beaten

For the lemon curd:

1 cup sugar
Finely grated zest of 3 lemons
4 large eggs
3/4 cup freshly squeezed lemon juice (from 4 to 5 lemons)
2 sticks plus 5 tablespoons (10 1/2 oz.) unsalted butter, room temperature, cut into 1-inch pieces

For the meringue (optional):

4 egg whites, room temperature
1/8 teaspoon cream of tartar
1 cup sugar
Powdered sugar for garnish

For the crust:

Blend the flour, sugar, and almonds in a food processor until the nuts are finely ground. Using on/off turns, cut in the butter until a coarse meal forms. Add the egg and blend just until dough forms. Gather dough into ball; flatten into a square 1-inch thick, wrap in plastic, and chill 1 hour.

Line the bottom of a 10-inch round removable bottom tart pan with parchment paper. Cut the dough into 1-inch slices. Lay the slices in the bottom of the pan and push them together, closing all fissures. Press the bottom of a glass against the dough to flatten and smooth. Then line the edges of the tart with slices of dough placed horizontally around the fluted edges. Press this dough into the bottom of the crust and into the fluted rim. Refrigerate the crust for one hour.

Preheat oven to 375°F. Bake the crust until golden brown, about 17 minutes. Remove the crust from the oven. You will notice that the crust is somewhat puffed up; this should be tamped down with the bottom of a glass or similar flat, heavy tool. Cool the crust and then remove the fluted ring by setting the tart pan over a jar and letting the ring fall to the counter. Use a flat metal spatula to lift the tart off of the metal tart pan bottom. Place on a plate to fill with curd and top with meringue.

For the lemon curd:

Have a thermometer, preferably an instant-read, a strainer, and a blender (first choice) or food processor at the ready. Bring a few inches of water to a simmer in a saucepan.

Put the sugar and zest in a large metal bowl that can be fitted into the pan of simmering water. Off heat, work the sugar and zest together between your fingers until the sugar is moist, grainy and very aromatic. Whisk in the eggs followed by the lemon juice.

Fit the bowl into the pan (make certain the water doesn't touch the bottom of the bowl) and cook, stirring with the whisk as soon as the mixture feels tepid to the touch. You want to cook the cream until it reaches 180°F. As you whisk the cream over heat—whisking constantly to keep the eggs from scrambling—you'll see that the cream will start out light and foamy, then the bubbles will get bigger, and then, as the cream is getting closer to 180°F, it will start to thicken and the whisk will leave tracks. Heads up at this point—the tracks mean the cream is almost ready. Don't stop whisking and don't stop checking the temperature. Getting to temp can take as long as 10 minutes.

As soon as you reach 180°F, pull the cream from the heat and strain it into the container of a blender (or food processor); discard the zest. Let the cream rest, stirring occasionally, for about 10 minutes.

Turn the blender to high and, with the machine going, add about 5 pieces of butter at a time. Turn off the blender and scrape down the sides of the container as needed while you're incorporating the butter. Once the butter is in, keep the machine going—to get the perfect light, airy texture, you must continue to beat the cream for another 3 minutes. If your machine gets hot, give it a little rest between beats.

Pour the cream into a container, press a piece of plastic wrap against the surface to create an airtight seal, and chill the cream for at least 4 hours or overnight. When you are ready to construct the tart, just whisk the cream to loosen it and spoon it into the tart shell.

For the meringue (optional):

Be certain that the egg whites contain no trace of yolk and that they are room temperature. In a mixer fitted with the whisk attachment (or with a hand mixer, or with a hand-held whisk in a bowl), beat the egg whites with the cream of tartar just until soft peaks form. Pour ¼ cup of the sugar in as the whites are beating. Let that incorporate and add the sugar ¼ cup at a time, slowly, until it is all incorporated and the whites are shiny and stiff.

Use a ½-inch piping tip to pipe the meringue on the tart, or spoon it over the tart making swirls and indents with the back of the spoon.

Brown the meringue either by skimming the edges of the meringue with a kitchen torch, or placing the tart in a 350 degree oven just until the meringue is lightly browned. Sprinkle powdered sugar around the edge of the tart, and serve chilled.

Serves 8.