

Vanilla Bean Caramel Sauce

Gift Idea:

Present the sauce with a glass jar of real vanilla beans, and an assortment of cookies or pound cake for serving with the sauce.

Kathy's Note:

Making caramel — the act of “melting” sugar over high heat and then mixing it with other ingredients — used to scare us so much that we avoided it altogether. But after many experiments we came up with this simple, no-fail recipe. Remember: there is nothing to fear but fear itself.

The caramel will last at least a week and can be used in an infinite number of ways — drizzled on pies, tarts and galettes, cheesecake, or on top of ice cream, yogurt, cookies, brownies, etc. Make a double batch and give the caramel sauce as a gift. Look for a squeeze bottle (the kind diners use to serve ketchup in) and you can have fun creating patterns and designs with the caramel.

Ingredients:

1/2 cup heavy cream

One 2-inch piece vanilla bean

1 cup sugar

1 tablespoon water

3 tablespoons unsalted butter, at room temperature

Place the cream in a small saucepan. Split the vanilla bean lengthwise with a small, sharp knife. Scrape the seeds into the cream, and add the empty bean. Bring the vanilla cream to a bare simmer over low heat, then remove from heat and set aside.

Combine the sugar and water in a small stainless steel or ceramic saucepan. Bring to a boil. Cook, swirling the pan occasionally to wash any burning sugar crystals off the sides of the pan, or use a pastry brush moistened with water to remove any sugar sticking to the sides of the pan. Cook until the mixture turns a golden caramel color. If you're using a candy thermometer, bring to about 305 degrees. Remove the sugar from the heat and immediately stir in the cream, being very careful since the sugar is very hot. (The mixture will bubble up a bit.) Whisk in the butter, stirring constantly until the butter melts completely. Using a slotted spoon, carefully remove the vanilla bean.

Transfer the caramel to a squeeze bottle, and use warm.

Store caramel at room temperature for a few hours, or refrigerate overnight. To reheat, fill a mixing bowl with the hottest tap water. Place the squeeze bottle in the bowl for 5 to 10 minutes, rotating occasionally, until the caramel loosens up. The caramel will keep for about a week.

Makes: about 1 cup.