

Perfecting Pavlova

Make this crisp-chewy meringue even better with a topping of passionfruit cream

BY NICKY MAJOR

Light but creamy, crisp but chewy, sweet but tangy—these contrasting flavors and textures are only part of why I think Pavlova is such a fantastic dessert. It's also colorful, pretty, and best of all, it's easy to make, once you've gotten the hang of it. And believe me, I've gotten the hang of it after more than twenty years of making Pavlovas in all sizes and varieties at my catering company in Vancouver, where it's my signature dish.

Pavlova has a base of meringue shaped into a free-form disk—kind of cloudlike—that's topped with whipped cream and fresh fruit. I make Pavlovas in three sizes: large, like a cake; individual, which are pretty for dinner parties; and mini, just about one-and-a-half bites and perfect for buffets and receptions. The thing that makes Pavlova different from other meringue desserts is that the meringue is crisp on the outside but soft and chewy, almost marshmallowy on the inside.

The dessert was named after the famous Russian ballerina, Anna Pavlova, but exactly who invented and christened the dish is unclear. Australians will say an Australian chef is responsible, but, as a New Zealander, I know it was a Kiwi chef.

FLAVORS AND FILLINGS

Because I'm from New Zealand, my favorite way to flavor Pavlova is with kiwis, of course, and with a



A Pavlova cross section shows crisp outside, fluffy inside. This dual texture makes Pavlova different from other meringues.

Mini Pavlovas make a sweet mouthful, topped with a single slice of kiwi or a berry or two. These tiny desserts are easy to assemble and serve for receptions.

Photo at far right: Mary Ellen Bartley



A perfect Pavlova has juicy fruit, cool cream, and crisp-chewy meringue. It also usually has some cracks, so don't worry about them.

passionfruit cream. But I also love the way bright red and purple berries look against the delicate off-white meringue shell, so I'll use whatever fruit is at its peak and works with the rest of the menu.

That's another great thing about Pavlovas—versatility. I can make it exotic with tropical fruit, or sweet and pretty with summer strawberries and raspberries, or even peaches and blueberries. As for the cream filling, a passionfruit purée is delicious, but if you can't find it, try another fruit purée, such as mango or raspberry. Or you can flavor the cream with vanilla extract and a little liqueur or brandy.

Although there's a lot of sugar in the meringue, the dessert isn't really very sweet. By leaving the cream filling unsweetened and piling it with fresh, sweet-tart fruit, Pavlova is satisfying but not over the top. And you can even make it fairly low in fat by cutting back on the cream a bit so you're eating mainly fat-free meringue and fresh fruit.

Pavlova is pretty on its own, but ever since a client asked for his to be served with chocolate sauce, I've really enjoyed a drizzle of the stuff on the side. Raspberry sauce is nice, too; use it to make a stunning presentation.

SIMPLE INGREDIENTS, PRECISE TECHNIQUES

Pavlova doesn't require very many ingredients—mostly superfine sugar and egg whites—but it does require precise measurements. Put the egg whites in a measuring cup to check the volume before you add them to the bowl. Add or subtract half a white if necessary to get just barely $\frac{3}{4}$ cup.

Timing is crucial to Pavlova—It takes a lot longer than you might think to whip the whites and add the sugar. And you don't want any interruptions, so assemble and measure all your ingredients, gather all your equipment, and turn on your answering machine because you won't be able to stop to take a quick phone call. The first tablespoon of sugar is the most important. It really needs to be added slowly and only when the whites are fully whipped, even to the point where they look like they're about to get "grainy" and dry. As soon as the sugar goes in, the egg whites will be out of danger of overbeating.

Temperature plays a part in your success—The temperature of your kitchen and of the ingredients is as important as that of the oven. Try to work in a cool, dry kitchen—meringues are temperamental in humidity. Your egg whites should be warm, however, so they'll whip up to full volume more easily. Warm

Photo: Mary Ellen Bartley

the bowl of your mixer under hot water before you start, and then keep the bowl slightly warm (not hot) during whipping by wrapping the base with a warm, damp towel. A steady, accurate oven temperature is crucial, so check it with an oven thermometer. If the oven is too hot, the Pavlova will start to brown and the outside will get too crisp before the inside is done. Heat the oven to 275°F and then turn it down to 250° as soon as you put in the Pavlova. The extra heat at the beginning will compensate for the heat you lose when the door is open. Don't put two baking sheets of Pavlovas in the oven at once unless they fit on the same rack; even heat and air circulation are vital for Pavlovas to cook and color correctly.

If you need to get a head start, you can bake the meringue up to two days ahead, cool it completely, and then store in an airtight container until you're ready to serve. And if you ever find yourself in the unlikely position of having leftover Pavlova, just freeze the whole thing—fruit, cream, and all—and enjoy it later as a frozen dessert.

PASSIONFRUIT PAVLOVA

Even if you like using hand tools, don't try making this dessert without an electric mixer, preferably a stand mixer—you simply won't have enough whipping power. The finished meringue base will be slightly cracked, which is normal and part of its cloudlike appearance. *Yields one large Pavlova, about 10 individual ones, or about 30 minis.*

FOR THE MERINGUE:

Scant ¾ cup egg whites (from 5 large eggs), totally yolk-free
¼ tsp. cream of tartar
Pinch salt
1½ cups superfine sugar
5 tsp. cornstarch, more for the baking sheet
2 tsp. distilled white vinegar
1 tsp. vanilla extract

FOR THE FILLING:

2 cups whipping cream, chilled
1 Tbs. honey (optional)
¼ cup passionfruit purée or pulp (optional)
About 3 cups cut-up fresh fruit or berries
Mint sprigs and confectioners' sugar to decorate

Position the oven rack just below the middle of the oven. (If you have an electric oven, put a shallow pan of water on or close to the bottom of the oven.) Heat the oven to 275°F. Line a baking sheet with kitchen parchment. Dust the sheet with cornstarch to help the meringue come off easily after baking.

Run a large, stainless-steel mixing bowl under hot water to warm it. Dry the inside thoroughly, add the egg whites, cream of tartar, and salt. Set the bowl in the mixer and surround the base of the bowl with a warm, damp dishtowel to keep the egg whites warm.

Whip the whites at medium-high speed until they're stiff and start to pull away from the sides of the bowl; they'll look like they're about to separate. Immediately start adding the superfine sugar by sprinkling it in slowly, about 1 Tbs. at a time; incorporating the whole 1½ cups should take about 10 min. Combine the cornstarch with the last 2 Tbs. of sugar and add them together. Scrape down the sides of the bowl, continue whipping, and slowly add the vinegar and vanilla. Whip for another minute. The mixture should be extremely glossy and fluffy.



Two scoops for an individual Pavlova. Smooth out the sides with a spatula to join the two halves, but leave the shapes swirly for a prettier finish.

◆ **For a large Pavlova**—Spread the meringue on the prepared baking sheet into a 7-in. round, about 3 in. high, using a spatula or spoon. Make a shallow depression in the center to allow for the filling. The shape should be even but still free-form with some swirls and peaks.

◆ **For individual Pavlovas**—Use a 3-oz. ice-cream scoop and stack two scoops, snowman-style, for each Pavlova. With a narrow spatula, smooth the sides to join the two scoops, and make a depression in the center.

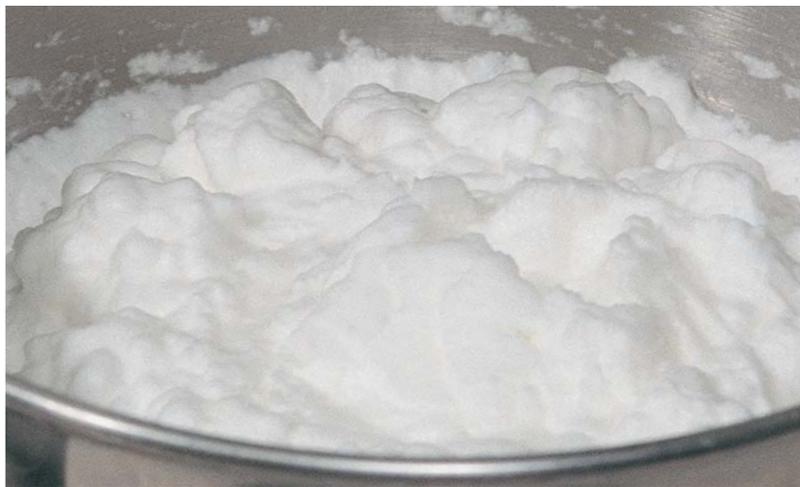
◆ **For mini Pavlovas**—Use a 1-oz. ice-cream scoop or two tablespoons. Drop one scoop onto the parchment for each Pavlova and make a small depression in the center.

To bake—Put the Pavlova in the heated oven and immediately turn down the heat to 250°. Bake, without opening the door for at least the first 45 min. (less for minis), until they're crisp and dry looking on the outside with just a hint of ivory color—minis, 35 to 40 min.; individuals, 1 to 1¼ hours. For a large Pavlova, bake 1½ hours, and then turn off the heat and leave it in the oven, with the door cracked, for another 30 min. Remove the Pavlova from the oven and put the baking sheet on a rack to cool.

To assemble—Up to 1 hour before serving, whip the chilled cream in the mixer or by hand until it holds soft peaks. Add the honey, if using, and whip another few seconds to blend, until the cream holds slightly firmer peaks. Carefully fold in the passionfruit purée with a spatula until it's mostly combined but a few streaks are left showing.

Carefully peel off the meringue from the parchment and set it on a serving platter or plates. Fill the center with the passionfruit cream and top with fresh fruit, letting a little fruit spill down the sides if you like. Decorate with mint sprigs and a sprinkling of confectioners' sugar. Keep cool and serve within 1 hour.

When your egg whites look like this, start adding sugar—pronto. A few more seconds and the whites will become grainy and separated, but if you add the sugar too early, the whites won't reach their full volume.



Nicky Major moved to Canada from New Zealand, with a stopover in London to study at Le Cordon Bleu. She owns Major the Gourmet, a catering and gourmet takeout company in Vancouver, British Columbia. ◆