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## Now Baking | Beyond Red Velvet Cake|

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February 10, 2010, 2:35 pm



John von Pamer Azuki Linzer cookies with a red bean, yuzu and white chocolate center.

Lately, some of the best sweets have been the color of love — and vegetables. With Valentine’s Day around the corner, these comforting red confections made from ingredients not usually associated with homey desserts gave me an idea: a new trademark treat for the holiday. I craved something in a Valentine-worthy hue that was easy to make, easy to love, but not so easy to recognize. There’d be an element of playful surprise — a beet, perhaps, or some beans.



John von Pamer Beet cupcakes with cream cheese frosting.

It started a few months ago while lunching at The Breslin. A dessert called “Best Cake” caught my eye. Actually, it was called Beet Cake. A cross between a red velvet and carrot cake, this two-tiered wonder was slathered in a thick, tangy, cream-cheese frosting and

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sprinkled with toasted hazelnuts. The base had a maroon tinge, not to mention more flavor than red velvet and less of the carrot's vegetal, single-note impact. It was love at first bite.

Soon after, I experienced another *coup de foudre* at the newest Birdbath depot in SoHo, which sells a better-than-it-sounds muffin made with rice milk and studded with crystallized ginger. A ribbon runs through it; a jammy streak of ruby-red azuki-bean paste. I asked Maury Rubin, the eco-conscious founder of Birdbath, if he'd consider jarring that red-bean *confiture* so I could spread it around. I had big plans for it. Rubin said he'd have to get back to me; he was all tied up with hot chocolate.

I didn't have time.

First order of business: Procuring a recipe from Kathryn Guy-Hamilton, the pastry chef at The Breslin. This was easy, because Katzie (her preferred nickname) couldn't have been more amenable. The "best" dessert had been taken off the menu and brought over to the hotel's Stumptown outpost next door in cupcake form — which, if you think about it, means more frosting per square inch of cake. It's an excellent innovation. True, the cupcake invasion has gotten out of control, but as a valentine offering, the portion aspect is ideal.

I like having options, and love the Japanese red bean and its myriad applications. In traditional tea sweets, the azuki, once sugared up a touch, takes on the attributes of a yam. It has a starchy texture and straddles the saline/saccharine line. How would this work in a Western-style pastry? The linzer cookie seemed like a good place to start: classic and easily formed into a heart. I didn't want to be a bully, though, so when I got in touch with Michael Berle, co-owner of Kyotofu and asked if chef Michelle Park might consider inventing a newfangled azuki goody, I merely invoked the linzer as inspiration. Must be kismet: Park makes this very shortbread sandwich as a valentine special, except hers has a strawberry-yuzu center. She was happy to try it with red bean instead, and used white chocolate as a

binder. The yuzu remains, and provides this subtle, pink-toned, Oreocream-like filling with a gentle burst of citrus. The cookie dough has hazelnuts in it, which plays off of the azuki's earthiness.

John von Pamer

Encouraged by the beet and bean successes, I wanted to try something more daring. There was one red veg I'd never tasted in dessert form: the *capiscum* (a.k.a. bell pepper). Who would be able to turn this ubiquitous

crudité regular into a gussied-up indulgence? Stephen Collucci, that's who. The former pastry master at Craft is now working his magic at the just opened Colicchio & Sons. He dove right in and presented a true triumph: red pepper cheesecake.



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Collucci didn't cheat. He didn't mask the pepper with a mass of cream-cheesiness. The vegetable speaks up, which you'll notice when you see the bright coral color of the thing and again when you try it. What's amazing is how much it tastes like the bell, and is still a dessert and a cheesecake. It's just the right amount of savory to make you pause and wonder, and then the graham-cracker crust kicks in and it's all childhood memories and flashes of Junior's.

Recipes for all three are yours for the giving.

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## FUSS-LESS BEET CUPCAKES WITH "SLABS" OF CREAM-CHEESE FROSTING

Adapted from Kathryn "Katie" Guy-Hamilton at the Breslin

### Cupcakes:

12 ounces butter  
2 teaspoons cinnamon  
2 teaspoons ground ginger  
2 cups sugar  
2 cups all-purpose flour  
1 teaspoon baking powder  
2 teaspoon baking soda  
1 1/2 teaspoons salt  
4 eggs at room temperature  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract  
3 cups shredded red or purple beets (in season try yellow for a corn-like flavor)  
1/2 cup orange juice  
1/2 cup toasted chopped hazelnuts.

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. In the bowl of a standing mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, cream the butter, spices and sugar on high speed for six minutes until fluffy and pale.
2. Sift together the flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt. With the mixer running on medium speed, add the eggs one at a time, stopping to scrape down after each egg. Add the vanilla extract.
3. In a separate bowl, stir the orange juice into the shredded beets that have been squeezed of most of their juice. (Save the juice for sorbet, a cocktail, what have you.) Mix until combined, then stir in the nuts. Using a spatula, fold in the dry ingredients and mix until just combined.
4. Scoop into paper-lined cupcake tins, or spray muffin tins with nonstick cooking spray and scoop batter directly into tins.

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5. Bake for 20 minutes until brown and a cake tester comes out clean. Cool before frosting and adorn with toasted hazelnuts. (Toast your nuts slowly at a low temperature for even toasting from inside out.) *Makes 12 cupcakes.*

## **Cream-Cheese Frosting:**

12 ounces cream cheese at room temperature  
8 ounces butter, softened  
8 ounces confectioner's sugar, sifted  
1 teaspoon sea salt  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract  
Zest of a quarter orange.

1. To keep it smooth and dense, paddle your cream cheese in the bowl of standing mixer on medium speed until smooth.

2. Put the cream cheese in a separate bowl. Add the butter to the mixer and mix on medium speed until smooth. Now add the cream cheese back into the butter, being sure to avoid "whipping" the mixture. Add the confectioner's sugar, salt, vanilla and orange. Paddle until smooth.

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## **ADZUKI LINZER COOKIES**

Adapted from Michelle Park at Kyotofu

### **Cookie Dough:**

1 pound butter  
3/4 cup sugar  
3 egg yolks  
1 teaspoon [vanilla paste](#) (The same quantity of extract will work, too)  
1 teaspoon lemon zest  
13.4 ounces (about 1.6 cups) all-purpose flour  
2 teaspoons baking powder  
1 teaspoon cinnamon  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
8 ounces ground hazelnuts (food processor is best).

1. In a stand mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, beat the butter and sugar on medium-high speed until creamed and fluffy. On low speed, add yolks, vanilla and lemon zest. Gradually add the dry ingredients until the dough pulls away from the side of the bowl. Roll dough to 1/8" thickness.

2. Using heart-shaped cookie cutters (1 large: approximately 5" tall; 1 small: approximately 1" tall), cut out cookies. (Each will have a top and bottom.) Use large cookie cutter for bottom. For top, use large cookie cutter, and cut out center using small heart shaped cutter.

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3. Bake at 350 for 6 minutes (for the smaller, cut-out heart tops) and 8 minutes (for the larger heart bottoms). Let cool.

4. To assemble the cookies: Pipe a 1/4"-thick layer of azuki filling onto the bottom heart cookie of each sandwich. Gently place the cut-out top heart cookies on top to close the sandwich. *Makes approximately 20 sandwich cookies.*

## **Adzuki Filling:**

1/2 pound white chocolate  
1 pound adzuki bean paste (see below)  
1 teaspoon yuzu zest  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract.

Melt the chocolate in a double boiler. Remove from heat and blend with azuki paste. Add yuzu zest and vanilla extract.

## **Adzuki Bean Paste:**

1 pound adzuki beans (try a Japanese supermarket like Sunrise Mart)  
3/4 pound sugar  
100 milliliters (3.38 fluid ounces) water.

1. Wash the beans and put them in a large bowl with plenty of water. Soak them for the time indicated on the package (approximately 6 to 8 hours). Peel.

2. Pour the beans and the water into a large pot and bring to a boil. Add 10 ounces water and bring to a boil again. Strain the water from the beans and immediately soak the beans in cold water for about 5 minutes. Return the beans to the pot and fill with water as before. Boil until beans become tender and easy to crumble. Strain the beans with a fine-mesh sieve or cheesecloth and put them in a large mixing bowl.

3. To make the paste, add enough water to the large bowl to fill and stir thoroughly. As the beans and water blend to begin forming a paste, repeatedly (three or four times) remove excess water from the top layer of the mixture until it forms a thick paste and the top layer of liquid becomes clear. Strain the bean paste through a cheesecloth to remove any excess liquid.

4. Make the syrup. Put sugar and into a large cooking pot. Boil until the sugar dissolves.

4. Add a half of the bean paste to the syrup and mix slowly over medium heat. When the mixture boils, add the rest of the bean paste and continue mixing slowly. Once the mixture is soft and creamy, remove from heat and scoop onto a large tray. Let cool completely.

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## RED BELL PEPPER CHEESECAKE

Adapted from Stephen Collucci at Colicchio & Sons

### Filling:

3 red bell peppers  
5 ounces cream cheese  
4 1/2 ounces sugar  
1 pinch salt  
1/4 teaspoon vanilla  
3 eggs  
1 yolk  
2 ounces heavy cream

Note: All ingredients should be at room temperature.

1. Preheat the oven to 300 degrees. Cut, de-seed and puree the peppers in a food processor or blender. In a small saucepan over low heat, cook the puree until it is thick and jammy. Let cool.
2. In a stand mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, cream the cream cheese and sugar, salt and vanilla on low speed. Gradually add the eggs, one at a time, mixing and scraping the bowl between additions to prevent lumps. Add heavy cream and mix until batter has a loose, pudding-like consistency (it should look like custard). Incorporate pepper puree.
3. Pour batter on top of prepared crust (see below). Bake until the cheesecake puffs up and is slightly set in the middle.

### Graham-Cracker Crust:

10 ounces graham cracker crumbs  
4 ounces sugar  
5 ounces butter, melted

Preheat the oven to 300 degrees. Combine the ingredients and press desired amount of crust into the bottom of a springform pan. Bake until crust becomes golden. Let cool before filling.