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Valentine's Day

February 14th, 2011

Recipe: **Very Vanilla Cheesecake Bars**



Cheesecake OMG...Love at first bite.

There's one problem with a traditional cheesecake, though; it's REALLY hard to serve it in really small pieces. Just try cutting a 1/4" slice of a round cheesecake... not happening, right?

Soooo, take that same luscious cheesecake, but bake it in a square pan
and all of a sudden it's easy to have, literally, "just a tiny bite."

A 1" x 1" cube of cheesecake?

No problem. And sometimes, that single bite is all you want – and all you need.

ENJOY...

OK Before you start: you'll want to have 16 ounces (two large packages) of cream cheese at room temperature; so give yourself a couple of hours for this to happen.

Preheat the oven to 375°F.

First, for the crust. Put the following in a bowl:

1 1/4 cups crushed pecan sandies, shortbread (my fav) or graham cracker crumbs, (about 8 whole crackers/cookies)
4 tablespoons confectioners' sugar
1/8 teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon ground cinnamon
5 tablespoons melted butter



Stir until the butter is thoroughly dispersed.

You can also do all of this in a food processor. Process the graham crackers and other dry ingredients until the crackers turn into crumbs, then add the melted butter and pulse briefly, just to combine.



Pour the crumbs into an ungreased 8" square pan.

Can you use a 9" square pan? Yes; see directions at the end of this post.

Press the crumbs into the bottom and about 1/2" up the sides of the pan.

At this point, the recipe calls for you to freeze the crust for 15 minutes, if you're using a metal pan (**NOTE:** not necessary if using ceramic or glass).

This is supposed to prevent the edges of the crust from slumping.



Ok, this time I didn't feel like waiting around, so I just went ahead and put the crust in the oven. Bake it for 8 to 10 minutes, until it feels a little bit hard/crunchy; the color won't change much, though it may brown a bit in the center and around the edges.

Remove the crust from the oven.

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Hmmmm No slumping!

Again, the recipe calls for you to cool the crust before filling and
OK I didn't really bother to do that, either...and it came out ok.

Next, the filling...

NOTE: First, before you forget, lower the oven temperature to 325°F.



Put the following in a mixer bowl:

16 ounces (2 large packages) cream cheese, at room temperature
1 cup granulated sugar



Mix until smooth.

NOTE: If the cream cheese is cold from the fridge, you'll end up with lumps.



Add the following:

- 1/4 cup heavy cream or sour cream
- 3 large eggs
- 2 to 3 teaspoons Vanilla Bean Crush (www.sonomasyrup.com) or vanilla extract
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly grated lemon peel, optional
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice, optional

FYI: I like my cheesecake pure vanilla, so I didn't use the lemon.
Some folks think the touch of lemon adds "New York deli" flavor.

But I did use Vanilla Bean Crush; which is AMAZING...you really do get beans and crushed pods along with the extract, as you can see from the sediment in the measuring spoon.

Mix on low to medium speed NOT HIGH...

Until combined and smooth, stopping to scrape the sides
and bottom of the bowl at some point.

Pour the batter into the crust.



FYI: It'll overflow in spots; not a problem.



See those flecks of vanilla? Nice!



Bake the bars for 30 to 40 minutes, until the filling is set but still soft in the center. An instant-read thermometer, inserted into the filling about 1" in from the edge, will read about 180°F.



NOTE: I got distracted and over-baked these; thus the cracks. I also mixed the filling at too high a speed; thus the bubbles Soooooo Do as I say, not as I do! LOL

Remove the bars from the oven, and cool at room temperature for 30 minutes.
Refrigerate until ready to serve.



Just before serving, top with fresh berries, fruit pie filling, or whipped cream.

Or not. These bars are delicious all on their own.

OK, NOW....

Want to get fancy for Valentine's Day?

Bake the bars in a 9" square pan, instead of an 8" square; and don't push the crust up the sides of the pan. Baking times will remain basically the same, with the larger pan taking, at most, a couple of minutes less than the smaller pan: go more towards 35 minutes than 40.



Once the bars have been thoroughly chilled in the fridge, find a heart shaped cookie cutter that's at least 3/4" deep. Cut down through the cheesecake layer, and completely through the crust.

Lift the heart out; it should stick in the cutter.

Position the heart over a serving plate, and gently press down on it to deposit it onto the plate.

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NOTE: This was kind of a bit of a fussy process.

The cake tends to stick; the crust tends to crumble. But, If you don't mind working slowly and carefully, you should do pretty well after you've tried a few for practice.



And you can always cover up any egregious crust mishaps with confectioners' sugar.

Ta Da...

Sending LOVE and hopes you will all
have lots of fun with this one too!!

xxdw