

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Grand Finale to the Year

The year is almost over whether we're ready or not. Are you still deciding on the grand ending for your New Year's Eve dinner? Those who aren't too worried about their waistline, or who have great self-control, can be planning on cheesecake. The rest of us might want something a little more restrained. Either way, here are a few hints.

If you're in the cheesecake category but have yet to create a perfect one, take heart. There are some fairly easy tricks to help you turn out a beautiful dessert. One important tool is the right pan. It's very hard to find a substitute for a springform pan. This is the kind of pan that has the bottom separate from the sides, and a spring and hinge on the side. With this pan you can lift the cake out of the sides without breaking or cutting it. You'll just open the spring to separate the sides from the bottom, and here comes a perfect cake out of the pan. Lovely!

Most cheesecakes do need about an hour in the oven. A slower oven (less hot) for a longer time will give a better quality and texture to the cake. So, another important tool to have before you start is an instant-read thermometer. You'll use this to decide when the cake is done, and avoid over-baking your impressive dessert. Over-baking is often the reason for big, ugly cracks across the middle of the cheesecake. Sticking a knife blade into the middle to see if the batter is set only helps cracks to start. But sliding the thin stem of a thermometer into the cake, at an angle from the side, gives you a way to check on the cake without ruining the center. When the cake has reached 150°F in the center, it's time to take it out of the oven. Even if it looks a little soft it will

stiffen as it cools. Don't over-bake it!

One last thing you need before you start is enough time. Plan ahead, because after an hour in the oven, the cake will need at least 5-6 hours in the refrigerator to set. So don't wait until the morning to start baking! Without enough time to chill the slices will sag and droop when you serve them.

On the other hand, be sure to give the cake at least half an hour at room temperature before you serve it. The little bit of warming will allow the full, rich flavor to hit your guests' tongues. A cold cake, made and baked the exact same way, will not taste nearly as good.

Next, take a look at the recipe. Most cooks and tasters prefer cheesecakes made with a crumb crust, and cakes that have sour cream or milk in addition to the cream cheese. You can use graham crackers or chocolate wafers for the crust, depending on the flavor that blends best with the flavor you're using. A cake made with just cheese tends to be heavy and taste gluey. The extra sour cream or milk helps to soften it and make it creamy. The smoothest cheesecakes also do not have flour or cornstarch. Eggs should be enough to stick the cake together, no flour needed.

Once the cake has been in the oven about as long as the recipe calls for, get out the thermometer. Put it in toward the side of the cake but angle it towards the center. If it reaches 150°F, the cake is done. Set it on a rack to cool. Here's one last trick to prevent those ugly cracks. While the cake is still hot, gently run a thin knife blade around the pan to separate the cake from the pan. This will allow the crust to shrink evenly as it cools without tearing and cracking.

Chill for at least 5 hours, let it warm for half an hour, then add your fruit topping.

If you'd rather save the calories for something else, here's another beautiful, fruit-filled, French dessert. Clafoutis are almost a blend of custard, cake and fruit all in one pan. With ground almonds and whole wheat flour, this one is sure to keep your tongue and heart happy. Happy New Year!

Almond and Cherry Clafouti

1 tsp butter	¼ cup + 1 Tbsp sugar
1 cup low-fat milk	3 eggs
1 cup almonds	¼ cup whole wheat flour
½ tsp almond extract	1 lb frozen sweet cherries, pitted

Preheat oven to 325°F. Grind almonds in food processor to make ¾ cup finely ground almond meal. Butter a 9-inch baking dish and sprinkle the 1 Tbsp sugar across the bottom. Beat the milk, eggs, ground almonds, flour, extract and the rest of the sugar until the batter is smooth. Scatter the cherries (okay if they're still frozen) in the baking dish and pour batter evenly over fruit. Bake about 50 minutes, or until toothpick in center comes out clean. Serves 8. Serve with milk or yogurt if desired.