

Move Over, Gingerbread Man

Spice up the season with four amazing desserts inspired by the most familiar of holiday flavors

BY JULIA M. USHER

If you're like me, the slightest hint of the holidays brings back a flood of food memories. My favorite is a steaming loaf of gingerbread fresh from the oven and slathered with whipped cream—just like the one my great-grandmother used to bake. But as much as I crave gingerbread's familiar flavor and the warm, fuzzy feelings it stirs up, I often find myself growing weary of loaves and cutout cookies long before Saint Nick arrives on Christmas Eve.

So what do I do to spice things up? I take other popular desserts and infuse them with the holiday spirit using gingerbread's defining ingredients: molasses and the spice trio of ginger, cinnamon, and cloves. For the holiday sweets in these pages, I sifted through my recipe files and selected des-

serts with the same rustic simplicity that had endeared me to gingerbread in the first place and then gave them a gingerbread twist. So, for example, my pear cobbler has a gingerbread biscuit topping that adds an element of surprise to this classic crowd-pleaser. I drizzle a luscious eggnog crème anglaise over a moist steamed coriander-gingerbread cake, and I make a creamy cheesecake doubly delicious by adding molasses and spices in both the gingersnap crust and the filling. (Cheesecake, by the way, is a real boon during the holiday rush because it has to be made ahead so it can chill overnight.) Finally, a velvety ginger-spice ice cream is an unexpected and delicious treat—especially if you serve it with the cobbler.



Molasses

Gingerbread's defining ingredients



Ground cloves



Ground ginger



Ground cinnamon

Use mild molasses

I use mild molasses—not blackstrap—for these desserts. Blackstrap molasses is intense and somewhat bitter, so I usually reserve it for savory dishes that are a better match for its strength. For more on molasses, see From Our Test Kitchen, p. 78.



Gingerbread-Pear Cobbler

Yields one 10x15-inch cobbler; serves twelve to sixteen.

Though best eaten warm from the oven—and even better with whipped cream or ice cream—this cobbler can be made a day ahead.

1 Tbs. softened unsalted butter for the pan

FOR THE PEAR LAYER:

5¼ lb. ripe pears (about 12 medium), peeled, cored, and cut into ½- to ¼-inch-thick slices (Bosc or Anjou pears work well)

¾ cup granulated sugar

2 Tbs. fresh lemon juice (from 1 lemon)

1½ tsp. minced lemon zest (from 1 lemon)

2 Tbs. minced crystallized ginger (about 1 oz.)

1½ Tbs. unbleached all-purpose flour

1 oz. (2 Tbs.) unsalted butter, at room temperature, cut into small pieces

FOR THE GINGERBREAD BISCUIT LAYER:

9 oz. (2 cups) unbleached all-purpose flour

5½ Tbs. granulated sugar

1 Tbs. ground ginger

2½ tsp. baking powder

2 tsp. ground cinnamon

¾ tsp. ground cloves

½ tsp. table salt

¼ tsp. baking soda

3 oz. (6 Tbs.) vegetable shortening
1¼ oz. (2½ Tbs.) unsalted butter,
at room temperature

2 large eggs

6 Tbs. whole milk

⅓ cup molasses

¾ tsp. pure vanilla extract

FOR THE TOPPING:

½ cup sliced almonds

2 Tbs. granulated sugar

Position a rack in the center of the oven and heat the oven to 400°F. Lightly butter a 10x15x2-inch baking dish.

Make the pear layer: In a large bowl, gently toss the sliced pears with the sugar, lemon juice, and lemon zest. Make sure the lemon juice completely coats the pears to keep them from browning. Sprinkle the crystallized ginger and flour over the top. Stir until evenly incorporated, breaking apart any ginger pieces that may be stuck together. Spread the pear mixture evenly in the bottom of the prepared pan and dot with the softened butter pieces.

Make the biscuit layer: In a medium bowl, stir the flour, sugar, ginger, baking powder, cinnamon, cloves, salt, and baking soda with a fork. With the fork, work in the shortening and the softened butter until the size of small peas.

In a small bowl, whisk the eggs, milk, molasses, and vanilla extract. Make a well in the center of the dry ingredients and pour the egg mixture into the well. Stir just until the dry ingredients are completely blended. Dollop the batter by heaping tablespoonfuls onto the pears to create a cobbled effect, taking care to space the dollops about 1 inch apart. (Though the batter will cover only about half of the pear layer, don't spread it out. It will rise and spread to cover most of the pears as it bakes. If you run out of space to dollop the batter before it's all used, distribute what remains among the existing dollops.)

Apply the topping and bake: Sprinkle the nuts and sugar evenly over the cobbler. Bake until the pears are tender and the topping is golden brown, 35 to 40 minutes. If needed, rotate the pan midway through the baking to allow the top to brown evenly. Let rest at least 20 minutes before serving. Serve warm.

Storing: Once completely cool, wrap the cobbler in plastic and store it at room temperature for up to 24 hours. For longer storage, refrigerate for up to one week. To reheat, remove the plastic, cover loosely with foil, and set in a 300°F oven until warmed through, 20 to 25 minutes.

When it comes to ground spices, freshness is key

Before you bake any of these desserts, check your ground spices for freshness. An old spice can mean the difference between a pleasantly spicy dessert and one that's downright bland.

Grinding whole spices is the best way to ensure that they're fresh. But it can be time-consuming, especially when you're juggling baking with tree-trimming, gift-wrapping, and all the other little tasks of the season. So bottled ground spices are fine if time is short. To make sure they're as fresh as possible when you buy them and that they stay fresh, follow these simple steps:

- ❖ **Inspect the expiration date on spice bottles** and choose those with the most distant dates, ideally six months away or more.
- ❖ **Throw away old spices.** Discard bottled spices if they have been open longer than six months.
- ❖ **Store spices properly.** Though you might be tempted to store spices (ground or whole) in pretty containers above your stovetop, where they're handy, they will stay fresh longer in a cool, dark cabinet or a corner of your refrigerator.

Ginger-Spice Ice Cream

Yields a generous 1 quart; serves eight.

To learn how to make the twisty cookie garnish on the bowls of ice cream below, see From Our Test Kitchen, p. 78.

4 large egg yolks
¾ cup plus 1 Tbs. granulated sugar
1½ cups heavy cream
1½ cups whole milk
1½ tsp. ground ginger
1 tsp. ground cinnamon
¼ tsp. ground cloves
2 Tbs. molasses
1 tsp. pure vanilla extract
Pinch table salt

Set a medium metal bowl in a large bowl of ice water and have a fine sieve at the ready.

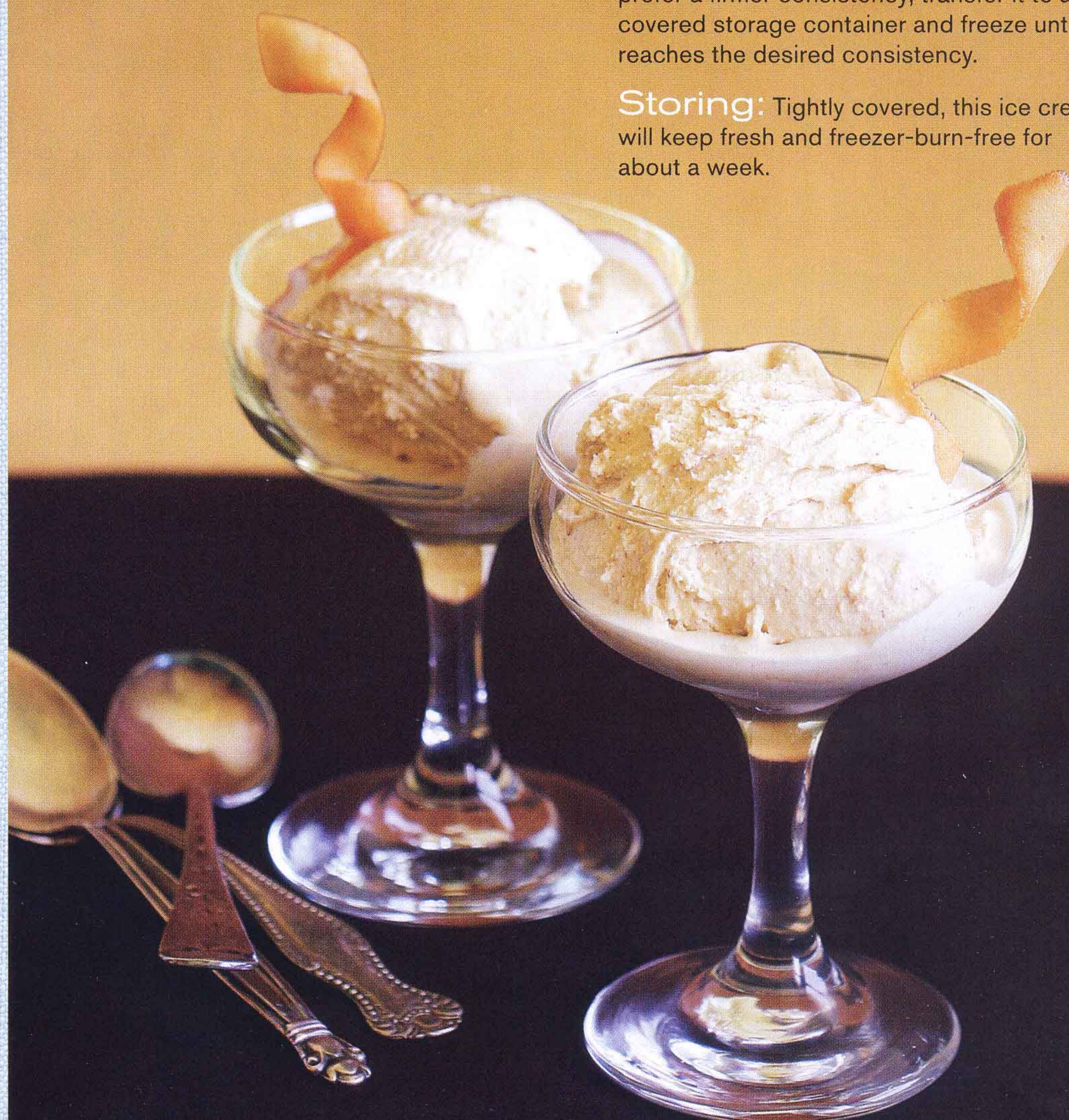
Whisk the egg yolks with ¼ cup of the sugar in a medium heatproof bowl. Combine the remaining ½ cup plus 1 Tbs. sugar with the heavy cream and milk in a 3-quart saucepan. Set over medium heat and stir occasionally until the milk is hot but not simmering. Whisk about ½ cup of the hot milk into the yolks and then whisk the yolk mixture back into the milk.

Reduce the heat to medium low and cook, stirring constantly with a clean wooden spoon or rubber spatula, until you see wisps of steam and the custard thickens slightly, 3 to 4 minutes. An instant-read thermometer should register 170° to 175°F. Don't let the custard overheat or boil, or it will curdle. Immediately strain the custard through the sieve into the bowl set in the ice-water bath to halt the cooking process (see sidebar, p. 63).

Sprinkle the ginger, cinnamon, and cloves over the custard while it's still warm and whisk well to distribute evenly. Wait 10 minutes and then whisk in the molasses, vanilla, and salt. Cover the surface of the custard with plastic to prevent a skin from forming and let it cool to room temperature. Take the bowl out of the water bath and cool thoroughly in the refrigerator (ideally overnight) before freezing.

Stir the chilled custard to evenly distribute any molasses or spices that may have settled to the bottom. Freeze in an ice cream maker according to the manufacturer's instructions. With most ice cream makers, the custard will reach its thickest consistency after churning 30 to 35 minutes. However, the ice cream can still be somewhat soft at this point. If you prefer a firmer consistency, transfer it to a covered storage container and freeze until it reaches the desired consistency.

Storing: Tightly covered, this ice cream will keep fresh and freezer-burn-free for about a week.





Ginger-Molasses Cheesecake

Yields one 10-inch cheesecake; serves sixteen to twenty.

I use gingersnaps from the store because their crunchiness makes them ideal for grinding to a fine crumb. Serve with a sprinkle of candied nuts—pecans would be great.

FOR THE CRUST:

- 2 cups finely crushed gingersnap cookies (about 8½ oz.; crush in a food processor or in a zip-top bag with a rolling pin)**
- 2 Tbs. granulated sugar**
- 2½ oz. (5 Tbs.) unsalted butter, melted; plus 1 tsp. melted butter for the pan**

FOR THE GINGER-MOLASSES FILLING:

- Five 8-oz. packages cream cheese, at room temperature**
- 1¾ cups granulated sugar**
- 1 Tbs. unbleached all-purpose flour**
- 1 Tbs. ground ginger**
- 1½ tsp. ground cinnamon**
- ½ tsp. ground cloves**
- ¼ tsp. table salt**
- 4 large eggs, at room temperature**
- 3 large egg yolks, at room temperature**
- ¼ cup molasses**
- 2 Tbs. heavy cream, at room temperature**
- 1 tsp. pure vanilla extract**

Position one rack in the center of the oven and another directly beneath it. Heat the oven to 350°F.

Make the crust: Mix the crushed gingersnaps and sugar in a small bowl. Using a fork or your hands, gradually work in the melted

butter, mixing until all the crumbs are moistened. Use your fingers and the bottom of a straight-sided, flat-bottomed metal measuring cup or drinking glass to press the mixture firmly into a 10x3-inch springform pan to create a uniform ⅛- to ¼-inch-thick crust that covers the bottom and goes 1 to 1½ inches up the sides. Bake the crust on the middle oven rack until it's fragrant and warm to the touch, 5 to 7 minutes. Let the pan cool on a rack while you prepare the filling.

Make the filling: Put the softened cream cheese in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with a paddle attachment. Beat on medium speed until very smooth and entirely free of lumps. Gradually add the sugar. Scrape down the sides of the bowl and continue mixing until the sugar has dissolved, 1 to 2 minutes. (Smear a small amount of the mixture between your fingertips; there should be no grittiness if the sugar has dissolved.)

In a small bowl, mix the flour, ginger, cinnamon, cloves, and salt. Sprinkle the mixture evenly over the cream cheese and mix on low speed until blended.

Add the eggs and yolks, one at a time, beating on medium speed until just combined. Scrape down the sides of the bowl after every other addition. (Beat no more than necessary to mix in each egg or you'll incorporate too much air, making the cheesecake dry and porous as opposed to dense and creamy.) Add the molasses, cream, and vanilla and mix until well combined.

Assemble and bake the cheesecake:

Brush the inside rim of the pan above the crust with the remaining 1 tsp. melted butter, without disturbing the crust. Pour the batter into the pan—it should fill the pan to a little above the crust. Put the pan on the middle oven rack and position a foil-lined baking sheet directly beneath it to catch any butter drips. Bake until the top of the cake is golden brown and the center just barely jiggles when the side of the pan is gently tapped, 1 hour and 10 to 20 minutes. It's fine if the cake develops a few cracks on the surface. Turn off the oven, open the door, and let the cheesecake cool in the oven for 15 minutes.

Set the cake on a rack until completely cool, at least 4 hours. Cover the cake loosely with plastic, cut a few air vents in the plastic, and refrigerate it overnight in the pan. When ready to serve, slowly release the pan sides. If any of the cake edge appears stuck, gently loosen it with a sharp paring knife before continuing to release the pan.

For the cleanest servings, use a sharp chef's knife and wipe it clean with a warm, damp cloth between slices.

Storing: Cover the cake loosely with plastic and refrigerate. It's best if eaten within a day or two, as the crust will soften.

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