

Beet and Buckwheat Waffles for Maslenitsa

Savory waffles for this Sunday - or any time of year.

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I'm feeling distinctly un-festive just now; I fear no one is in the mood for Maslenitsa, Russia's raucous version of Carnival Week, which is upon us once again.

In previous years, I've written about the classic pancakes, which are such an integral part of Maslenitsa, be they plump, puffy oladi or thin and crisp buckwheat bliny. Pancakes are potent symbols in Slavic pagan iconography and were absorbed into Orthodox Christian traditions as well: the round shape, symbolizing eternal life, is a prominent feature of Maslenitsa, an ancient festival dedicated to coaxing the sun back to earth. Pancakes are also served at funerals as a bittersweet reminder of the hope for eternal life and the natural life cycle of all living beings.

During Maslenitsa, the house should be saturated with the smell of frying dough and the refrigerator heaving with sticky jars of sumptuous toppings for pancakes, such as jelly, jam, sour cream, caviar, or hazelnut chocolate spread. This year, our celebrations will be subdued — probably winnowed down to something nice for Sunday breakfast. And this year, I'm making that using one of the more underutilized bits of kitchen equipment: the waffle iron. There is very little that isn't made better by sticking it in the waffle iron: leftover Thanksgiving stuffing, for example, or mashed potatoes and cheddar cheese, a tuna sandwich on soft white bread, or (wait for it) a bag of frozen tater tots. The latter is my favorite party trick, which creates a delectably crisp pancake not unlike a hash brown that cries out to be blanketed by runny sunny side up fried eggs or slices of smoked fish and sour cream.

The waffle iron acts much as a panini press does adding a crisp and crunchy exterior and cooking a fluffy — or gooey and sticky if you are using cheese — interior. It's a remarkably swift solution to feeding a crowd, with blessedly minimal clean up. When confronted with a surfeit of leftovers — reach for the waffle iron and watch the magic happen.

But this week, I'm going to use the waffle iron as nature intended, to make delicious and healthy waffles using two of Russia's primary ingredients: buckwheat and beets. I'm a big fan of savory waffles, which make a quick and easy but very satisfying weeknight supper, when topped with a bit of smoked salmon, mushroom puree, creamy chicken, or herring and sour cream. Some years ago, at the request of a friend trying to follow a gluten and sugar free regime, I developed this recipe for charming pink waffles, pairing the deep, caramel sweetness of roasted beets with the nutty flavor of buckwheat flour. To my immense satisfaction, these waffles proved equally appealing as normal waffles to a group of rather fussy (read spoiled) children, particularly when paired with jam and sour cream or more traditional maple syrup.

As with my buckwheat bliny, taking the time to whip up the egg whites gives the waffles a fluffy texture, and letting the batter sit for at least 30 minutes is an essential aspect to this recipe.

Possible toppings abound with these waffles, which can go sweet or savory depending on your mood: from a punnet of fresh berries to a side of smoked salmon. Enjoy.

Ingredients

- 1/2-cup (120 ml) all-purpose flour
- 1 cup (236 ml) buckwheat flour
- 1-1/2-tsp baking powder
- 1 tsp baking soda
- 1/2-tsp salt
- 2/3-cup (156 ml) plain yogurt
- 2/3-cup (156 ml) pureed roasted beets (about one medium-sized beet)
- 1 cup (236 ml) buttermilk or kefir
- 1/2-cup (120 ml) melted butter, cooled to room temperature
- 3 eggs, beaten
- 3 egg whites: keep the whites separate
- Cooking spray for the waffle iron

Instructions

- Whisk together the flours, baking powder, baking soda and salt in a large mixing bowl.
- Whisk the beet puree and yogurt together until combined. Add the buttermilk, whole eggs, and melted butter and whisk to combine.
- Beat the egg whites until they are stiff peaks. Gently fold the egg whites into the batter. Cover the batter with a clean towel and let stand for 30-45 minutes.
- Preheat the oven to 200°F (about 95°C) and line a baking sheet with parchment paper.
- Heat the waffle iron to its highest setting. When ready, spray a thin coating of cooking spray on it. Cook until the waffle iron shows it is done, then leave the waffles in the iron for an additional 2 minutes. Remove to the prepared baking sheet and keep warm in the oven until you are ready to serve.

Recipe Notes: These waffles are at their peak of perfection just off the iron, but if you find you have any leftover, they crisp up beautifully in a toaster!

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