Chocolate Bread Pudding Maurice

This is a special recipe on a number of scores. It is as rich as possible, a delicate, satiny-smooth, very chocolate-y custard in which small saturated pieces of bread—homemade is best—float, half-dissolved. The whole is set off to perfection by the tang and hue of raspberry sauce. This was frequently on the inn menu, and the recipe was requested whenever it was.

It is named for my late father, the irreplaceable, irrepressible Maurice Zolotow. He adored this dessert. When we made it at the inn, we used to serve it on a large plate, first writing "Maurice Z" in raspberry sauce on the plate, then scooping on the chocolate bread pudding in one corner. Waitstaff, buzzing in, would call, "I need two Maurices . . ." Adoring my father as I did, to hear his name in this fashion was a pleasure tinged with the sharp knowledge that all we love we must lose, that we are all here on loan—sweet and bitter as the chocolate.

This makes a huge pan's worth, so make it for a party. *And don't under any circumstances overbake it.* It should be quite wet when it comes out of the oven; it sets as it cools. A good bread is part of the allure. Homemade rolls or European-style unsweetened whole grain loaves work well. **SERVES 12 TO 18**

Cooking spray
2¾ cups large crumbs of good bread, sufficient to cover the pan ½ inch deep
2 cups heavy cream
1⅓ cups half-and-half or whole milk
5 ounces semi-sweet chocolate, coarsely chopped
5 ounces unsweetened chocolate, coarsely chopped
1⅔ cups sugar
5 large eggs
3 large egg yolks
1 tablespoon pure vanilla extract
Raspberry Sauce (page 1064)
Lightly sweetened whipped cream
Fresh fruit (strawberries, raspberries, kiwi fruit slices, star fruit slices, fresh orange twists), and mint leaves or sprigs

1 Spray an 11-by-14-by-2-inch pan with cooking spray. Spread the bread crumbs evenly over the bottom of the pan. You want a layer about ½ inch deep. Set aside.

2 Scald the cream and half-and-half in a heavy-bottom saucepan over medium heat. Add the chopped chocolates and whisk until the chocolate is melted. Remove from the heat.

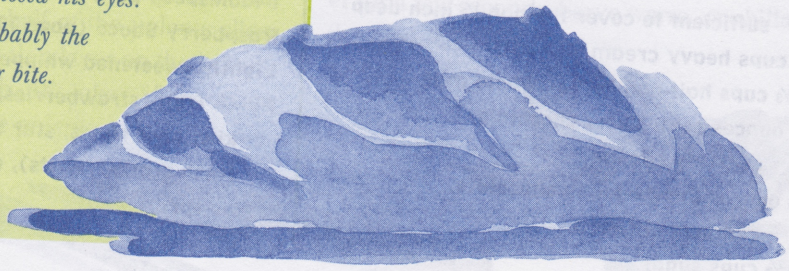
3 Place the sugar, eggs, egg yolks, and vanilla in a food processor; buzz to blend. Add about half of the chocolate mixture and buzz until smooth and well combined. Whisk this mixture back into the saucepan until very well combined.

4 Pour the hot mixture over the bread crumbs. Let sit, covered, at room temperature for 1 hour.

5 Toward the end of the hour, preheat the oven to 325°F. Set the pan with the pudding in a larger pan of very hot water (read how to use a bain marie on page 275), and place it in the preheated oven. Bake until the top is dark and glossy, about 35 minutes. Do not overbake; it should be fairly liquidy—the first time you make it, you will be dubious that it'll set up. Remove the pans from the oven and let the pudding cool slowly, at room temperature, then refrigerate. It will set to the consistency of a soft, custardlike pudding as it cools; don't expect the bricklike masses you may have known in the past as bread puddings. This is scooped with a spoon, not cut in squares with a spatula.

6 To serve it the way we used to, use a dinner plate, not a dessert plate, with a plain white center. Write the name "Maurice Z" with Raspberry Sauce placed in a squeeze-bottle (or, ladle a little pool of Raspberry Sauce.) Scoop a serving of chocolate bread pudding—not too big, it's really rich—to the side. Top with a dollop (or pipe on) some whipped cream. Garnish with fresh fruit and a mint leaf.

Irrepressible Maurice

Maurice Zolotow, my father, looked a little like one of the comedians at the beginning of Broadway Danny Rose. *Although he was erudite and given to quoting from Proust, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot, he was also wholly keyed into pop culture. He was Marilyn Monroe's first biographer, and a photograph of him with John Wayne (another of his subjects) and Ann-Margret is on my wall. At the time of his death he was working on a memoir called* Famous People Who Have Known Me. *He continually tore out and sent me clippings and magazine articles he felt I must read, immediately, relevant parts circled in red.*

But a different Maurice—calm, a little reverent, proud—came out when I fed him. He adored sweets, in particular this bread pudding. The first time I served it to him, he took off his glasses so he could peer at it closely (he was nearsighted). He inhaled it. He took a spoonful, closed his eyes. Swallowed. Opened his eyes. "Wow," he said (probably the sole one-word sentence he ever spoke to me). Another bite. Then, gazing up at me with his large pale blue eyes, he said, "Cres, on a scale of 1 to 10, I give this dessert a 5,000."