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DIVAS ON A DIME

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PHOTO CREDIT: www.JasonCoblentz.com

PHOTO CAPTION: This silky Italian dessert looks like you fussed. Panna cotta is happy to

keep your secret.



The Easiest Elegant Dessert You'll Make All Summer

The first time I saw panna cotta, I wasn't entirely sure what I was looking at.

There on the plate was this perfectly smooth, glossy little dessert. It wasn't pudding. It wasn't custard. It certainly didn't look like gelatin. Then I took a bite.

If Jell-O and vanilla ice cream had a love child, this would be it. And I would eat it.

Panna cotta is one of those desserts that looks far more sophisticated than it is. The name is Italian for "cooked cream," which is a wonderfully straightforward description of something that tastes so luxurious.

At its simplest, panna cotta is cream, sugar and gelatin, usually flavored with vanilla. Unlike traditional custard, there are no eggs to temper and no water bath to deal with. Gelatin does the structural work, setting the cream just enough that it holds its shape while remaining soft, silky and impossibly creamy.

And in the middle of summer, that's exactly the sort of dessert we want.

Panna cotta is made ahead and served thoroughly chilled, so there's no last-minute cooking when the kitchen already feels like the surface of Mercury. Make it in individual ramekins, glasses or little jars, refrigerate until set, then dress it up just before serving.

Fresh berries are lovely, but don't stop there. Top it with a fruit compote,

drizzle with chocolate or caramel, scatter shaved chocolate across the top or add peaches, mango, pineapple or passion fruit. A little citrus adds brightness to all that glorious cream.

Best of all, panna cotta has that rare culinary superpower: It makes people think you've done considerably more work than you actually have. And that's divine.

PANNA COTTA

Yield: 4 to 6 Servings

Total Time: 4 hours 20 mins.

1 1/2 cups cold whole milk

1 envelope (1/4 ounce) unflavored gelatin

1 1/2 cups heavy whipping cream

1/3 cup sugar

1/2 teaspoon grated lemon zest, optional

1/2 teaspoon kosher salt

1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla bean paste with seeds (or 2 teaspoons vanilla extract)

For serving: Fresh peaches, berries, cherries and/or mint leaves, optional



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Bloom the gelatin: Pour the cold milk into a medium saucepan. Sprinkle the gelatin evenly over the surface, then whisk to combine. Let stand 5 minutes. The gelatin will swell and the milk may look curdled. Don't panic; it's supposed to look like that.

Place the saucepan over medium-low heat and whisk gently until the gelatin has completely dissolved and the mixture looks like milk again. (milk = no lumps.)

Do not allow the mixture to simmer or boil; excessive heat can weaken gelatin's setting power.

Add the cream, sugar, lemon zest and salt. Warm gently, stirring, until the sugar has completely dissolved. Do not boil.

Remove from the heat and stir in the vanilla bean paste or extract. Let stand 10 minutes to allow the flavors to mingle.

Pour the mixture into a large bowl or measuring pitcher, preferably clear if using vanilla bean paste. Refrigerate, uncovered, for about 1 hour, stirring well after 30 and 45 minutes and scraping down the sides. This allows the mixture to thicken slightly so all those lovely vanilla seeds stay suspended instead of staging a mass migration to the bottom.

After about 1 hour, the panna cotta should have the consistency of heavy cream, and the vanilla seeds should remain suspended after stirring.

Divide evenly among serving glasses or ramekins. Refrigerate at least 4 hours, or preferably overnight, until set.

Top with fresh fruit and mint, if desired.

Serve it after dinner on the patio, perhaps with a glass of prosecco, and for a few glorious minutes you can pretend you're spending a summer evening in Italy.

Lifestyle expert Patti Diamond is the penny-pinching, party-planning, recipe developer and content creator of the website Divas On A Dime — Where Frugal, Meets Fabulous! Visit Patti at www.divasonadime.com and join the conversation on Facebook at [DivasOnADimeDotCom](https://www.facebook.com/DivasOnADimeDotCom). Email Patti at divapatti@divasonadime.com