CLASSIC TIRAMISU AT GASTHOF WEISSES LAMM, NUERNBERG-KORNBERG, GERMANY.

TIRAMISU, BIERAMISU

BY SHARON HUDGINS

I first saw the word "TIRAMISU" on a handwritten sign tacked to the wall of a little pizza joint near Verona, Italy, in the early 1980s. Being an adventuresome eater, I wanted to order this Japanese-sounding dish, just to see what it was. However, my husband talked me out of it. We'd already eaten two big pizzas, the hour was late, and we still had to drive all the way over the Brenner Pass back home to Munich that night. Goodbye, tiramisu...

The next evening, at our favorite Italian restaurant near Munich, the typewritten daily menu listed as one of the desserts: *Hausgemacht Tiramisu*. Knowing that anything hausgemacht (homemade) at that restaurant was bound to be good, I wanted to order it immediately. But my wary husband insisted that we first ask the waiter to tell us what tiramisu was.

His description left our mouths watering: Ladyfingers flavored with espresso coffee, layered with mascarpone cheese beaten together with eggs, sugar, and liqueur, and topped with powdered chocolate. Sort of like the Italian *zuppa inglese* dessert, he said, but not really the same thing. "Delicious! Try it – you'll like it," he concluded. He didn't have to convince me. I was already sold on the idea. And the rich, moist, creamy concoction that he brought to the table was even better than I expected. Instead of dividing it equally with my husband, as promised, I ate the lion's share without shame. I had just discovered a new vice.

Within two days' time, I had twice encountered this "new" – and sinfully delicious – Italian dessert. I wondered why I'd never tasted tiramisu during all my previous travels in Italy. And why had I never seen it before on the menus of Italian restaurants in Germany? I looked in all seventeen of my Italian cookbooks, but none mentioned tiramisu.

Photo courtesy Sharon Hudgins

None of my food magazines contained a recipe for it, either. How could I find out how to make it at home?

I finally wrote to *Gourmet* magazine in the United States to ask if its research staff could tell me anything about tiramisu. *Gourmet* obliged by sending me a recent *New York Times* article about tiramisu, along with two current magazine stories on the subject. In one of them, food writer Marian Burros noted that tiramisu was the "newest Italian dessert in New York restaurants." (Remember, this was around 1983.) Almost unknown in New York three years before, it had apparently taken the city by storm. Burros also pointed out that "New Yorkers have fallen in love with tiramisu under the mistaken impression that it is light" – a notion that left me dumfounded. Tiramisu – *light*? Anyone who had eaten that heavy, gooey, creamy, caloric, cholesterol-filled dessert surely knew that tiramisu was a hip-hugging, cellulite-producing, heart-attack-special.

A few days later, an American friend in Germany mentioned that tiramisu was her favorite dessert and offered me her foolproof recipe for it. Soon after that, someone else gave me an Italian recipe for tiramisu, from a restaurateur and cooking teacher in Arezzo. I learned that the word "tiramisu" translates from the Italian as "lift me up" or "pick me up" – and certainly the caloric combo of caffeine, chocolate, sugar, and high-fat cheese provides a powerful boost to the eater. However, as I delved further into the subject, I also discovered that there were almost as many versions of this dessert as cooks – and that most of those cooks had very firm ideas about the "correct" way to make "authentic" tiramisu. Put all of them together in the same room and you'd end up with an Italian custard cake fight more vicious than any in Mack Sennett's wildest dreams.

"I learned that the word "tiramisu" translates from the Italian as "lift me up" or "pick me up" –"

The origin of this popular pick-me-up is debated by food historians, although they all agree that its birthplace was Italy. Some say that tiramisu dates from Florence in the 1500s. Others claim that it's just a variation of the classic *zuppa inglese* layered custard dessert from Emilia-Romagna, which came into vogue in the 1800s. And others swear that it was invented by a restaurateur in the Veneto region of northern Italy in 1981. Whatever the truth, tiramisu apparently didn't travel beyond the borders of Italy until the early 1980s, when it took off like a comet.

As tiramisu rapidly spread across the globe, by the early 1990s it even became the biggest foreign-food fad in Japan. Fast-food chains in Japan, including Wendy's and Kentucky Fried Chicken, added tiramisu to their menus; Asahi Breweries began marketing a Tira soft drink; and another Japanese company launched a Tiramisu chocolate bar. Continuing its trek around the world, tiramisu is now even sold at Asian bakeries in the United States. And recently I was on an Australian cruise ship headed toward Japan, where the German chef served up "Tokyo Tiramisu with Adzuki Bean Paste and Green Tea."

Tiramisu's popularity also turned it into a dessert far removed from the original Italian version. Variations today include low-carb and low-fat versions; tiramisus made with sponge cake, pound cake, or chocolate cake instead of ladyfingers; ones that substitute hot chocolate, beer, or wine for the coffee, and replace the mascarpone cheese with frozen yoghurt, ice cream, or zabaglione custard; tiramisus "lightened" with beaten egg whites or whipped cream (sometimes both), and "stabilized" with gelatin; and versions that include fruits, berries, and nuts.

Tiramisu also lends its name and flavors, if not its authenticity, to other recipes for cakes, puddings, and ice creams, such as *Bon Appetit's* 1994 recipe for "Frozen Hazelnut Tangerine Tiramisu" and several kinds of tiramisu cheesecake. And since the Italians like to riff on their own culinary compositions, twentieth-century tiramisu even started showing up in Italy in a variety of other forms, such as tiramisu *gelato* and tiramisu *pandoro* (a type of sweetened yeast bread).

Germans apparently fell in love with tiramisu around the same time that New Yorkers did, back in the early 1980s. Soon savvy stores were displaying mascarpone cheese and ladyfingers side-by-side, and giving away free copies of recipes for this trendy dessert. Tiramisu started turning up in the frozen-food sections of German grocery stores, and vendors began selling it at Munich's Oktoberfest.

In Germany during the past three decades, as tiramisu migrated from Italian restaurant menus to German restaurants and cookbooks, it morphed into many other variations along the way. My German *Lebkuchen* (gingerbread) cookbook includes a recipe for "Nürnberger Tiramisu," in which traditional Nürnberg gingerbread cookies take the place of ladyfingers, and the mascarpone cheese is flavored with plum brandy. I have another German cookbook with a recipe for "Bieramisu," in which the ladyfingers are dipped in wheat beer or dark beer instead of coffee. And at a well-known restaurant in Garmisch,

Germany, I once ordered *Nusspudding "Tirami so" mit Cognacsoss und Mandelgebäck*, which turned out to be an individually molded hazelnut pudding with a roasted walnut half on top, garnished with cognac cream sauce and an almond cookie on the side. Tasty, but it didn't have anything to do with tiramisu.

I've always been a purist about tiramisu, with fond taste memories of discovering this dessert in Germany thirty years ago and eating authentic versions of it both there and in Italy. Back in 1985, a couple of years after I'd first encountered tiramisu, I happened to eat at the Piccola Osteria, a charming little Italian restaurant in the heart of Munich. "Tiramisu" was chalked on the black board listing the specials that day. Sitting at my tiny table, savoring a bowl of *gnocchi* with Gorgonzola sauce, I watched a steady stream of well-dressed customers enter the restaurant. Speaking French, German, Italian, Spanish, English, or Serbo-Croatian, each drank a glass of wine at the bar, chatted with the multilingual staff, then left with a plastic container full of tiramisu. One man noticed my interest in all this take-out tiramisu and made a point of stopping by my table to say that the restaurant's tiramisu was the best in Munich.

The next time I lunched at the Piccola Osteria, the couple sitting at the table next to mine had tiramisu for dessert – and felt compelled to tell me that it was "the best in Munich." My defenses thus weakened, I gave in and ordered a portion of it, too. That tiramisu was indeed excellent, equal to the best I'd ever eaten in Italy. When I asked the waiter for the recipe (hoping that it wasn't the chef's secret), he gladly wrote it on the back of my lunch bill. And after all my years of research into the history and evolution of tiramisu, that's the recipe I still like the best. It's authentic, easy to make, and tastes exactly like real Italian tiramisu did before the culinary tweakers started changing it into something else.

TIRAMISU

It's important to use the correct type and size of pan for this recipe – a 10 x 14 x 2-inch glass or ceramic pan (or two 8 x 8 x 2-inch square glass pans). For a non-alcoholic version, omit the almond liqueur and beat 1 tablespoon of vanilla extract into the mascarpone mixture.

3 cups cold strong coffee (espresso, or dark-roast filter coffee brewed double strength)
2/3 cup Amaretto or other almond liqueur (divided use)
2 tablespoons sugar
3 large eggs, at room temperature
7 egg yolks, at room temperature
1-1/2 to 2 cups sugar (depending on sweetness desired)
1-1/2 pounds (24 ounces in weight, about 3 cups in volume) mascarpone cheese*, at room temperature
14 to 16 ounces Italian savoiardi cookies or ladyfingers**
2 to 3 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder

* If mascarpone cheese is unavailable, substitute 1 pound ricotta cheese and 1/2 pound cream cheese, blended together in a food processor until smooth.

** *Savoiardi* are crisp dry ladyfingers from Italy. Alessi brand *savoiardi*, sold in the United States, are excellent for this dish (a 14-ounce package contains 48 cookies). If using the softer American version of ladyfingers, first toast them in a preheated 375° F. oven for 10 to 15 minutes to dry them out. Cool before using.

Combine the cold coffee with 1/3 cup of the almond liqueur and 2 tablespoons of sugar in a shallow bowl. Set aside.

In a large bowl, beat the whole eggs, egg yolks, and 1-1/2 to 2 cups of sugar with an electric mixer on low speed for 2 minutes. Increase mixer speed to high, and beat for an additional 5 minutes, until the mixture is pale and fluffy. Reduce mixer speed to low, and add the remaining 1/3 cup of almond liqueur. With the mixer still on low speed, add the mascarpone, 2 heaping tablespoons at a time, beating well after each addition. When all the mascarpone has been added, increase mixer speed to medium and beat for 2 minutes longer.

Use half the total number of ladyfingers for each layer in the 10 x 14 x 2-inch pan. Dip each ladyfinger, one at a time, very briefly in the flavored coffee (dipping both sides in the coffee without letting them become soggy), and arrange them evenly in a single layer in the bottom of the pan. Spread half the mascarpone mixture in an even layer over the ladyfingers. Repeat this process, placing another layer of coffee-dipped ladyfingers on top of the mascarpone layer in the pan, then covering the ladyfingers with the remaining half of the mascarpone mixture. Smooth the top of this last layer with a spatula, then sift 2 to 3 tablespoons of unsweetened cocoa powder evenly over the mascarpone.

Cover the pan with plastic wrap or aluminum foil and refrigerate for at least 4 hours, preferably overnight. To serve, cut the tiramisu into squares – and sift additional powdered cocoa over the top, if desired. Keep leftover tiramisu, covered, in the refrigerator for up to 3 days.

Makes 16 very rich servings.

"BIERAMISU" VARIATION: Omit the almond liqueur in the mascarpone cheese mixture and add 1 tablespoon vanilla extract instead. Combine 3 cups of dark beer with 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon, and dip the ladyfingers in this (instead of in coffee).

Sharon Hudgins is celebrating her fifteenth year as the food columnist for German Life.