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In Your Kitchen: Salted Peanut Caramel Brownies

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THE RECORD

Most of us have become familiar with the label "gluten free" on supermarket shelves and increasingly, on restaurant menus. Celiac disease – the body's inability to process gluten – affects about 1 in 100 people and May is National Celiac Awareness Month.

Gluten-free cookbooks have been surfacing in increasing numbers, especially those that focus on desserts and baking. Since people with celiac can't have any form of wheat, it's a challenge to come up with flour substitutes that don't change the taste and texture of cakes and breads. Among the gluten-free baking books I've seen lately, Carol Kicinski's "Simply ... Gluten-free Desserts" made a great first impression with its enticing photographs and out-of-the-ordinary recipes.

When reading, it's generally a good idea to start at the beginning. But that's not the case with cookbooks. You should be able to open to any recipe and jump right in. I found lots of things I



The finished brownie.

Simply...Gluten-free

wanted to bake right away: chocolate marmalade cake, carrot cake cookies, fig and goat cheese tarts; coconut-mango panna cotta.

A colleague on a gluten-free diet, who has raised my awareness, advised me to choose something chocolate – gluten-free desserts made with chocolate taste the best, she said – so I set about baking Kicinski's Salted Peanut-Caramel Brownies. For the first ingredient, the recipe lists "sweet rice flour blend." Unable to find a product by that name at Whole Foods, I substituted brown rice flour – and the result was fine. Then, I perused the cookbook further and toward the front found a long description of "sweet rice flour blend" – not at all a product you buy, but a mix of five ingredients: brown and white rice flour, potato starch, tapioca starch and xanthan gum. Shame on me, perhaps, for not starting at the beginning, but it would have been a good idea for the author to include a note or star next to "sweet rice flour blend" in her recipes to "see page 14."

As delicious as the brownies made with plain brown rice flour were, I imagine they would be even better with the blend, which is the result of Kicinski's research into making gluten-free baked goods. Having been diagnosed with celiac herself, she is a fine example of the new breed of cooks who refuse to treat dietary restrictions as a reason to deny yourself the pleasures of the table, but who instead celebrate the challenge to be creative in the kitchen.

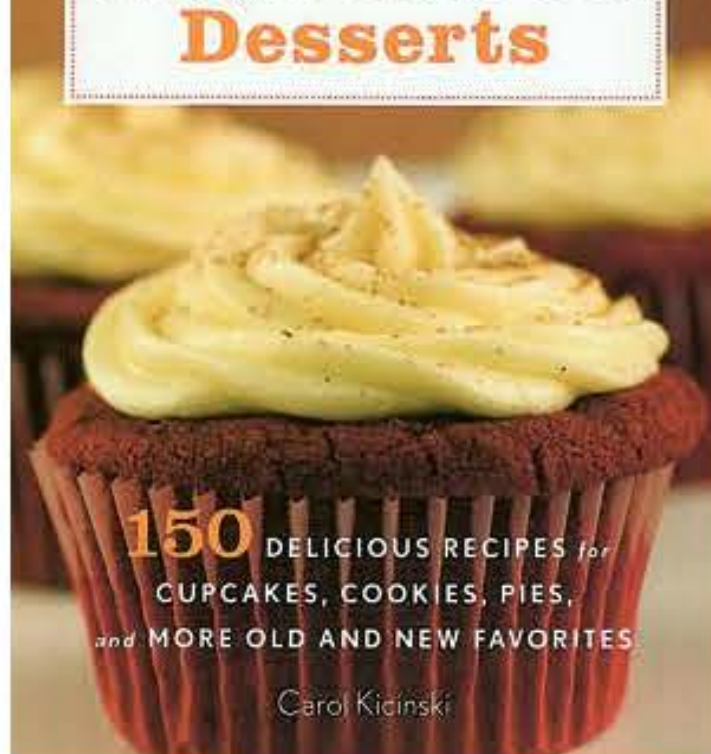
SALTED PEANUT-CARAMEL BROWNIES

These are astonishingly rich; the fudgy base and the gooey caramel results in something more like a truffle than a brownie. I cut them in small squares and shared them with my colleagues – to rave reviews. If you offer them to guests, I suggest serving the bite-sized pieces in paper candy cups to contain the caramel, which will ooze as these come to room temperature. Recipe from "Simply ... Gluten-free Desserts."

Brownies:

1 cup brown rice flour (the original recipe calls for "sweet rice flour blend," see Susan's Tips, below)

1/2 teaspoon kosher or fine sea salt



"Simply ... Gluten-free Desserts" by Carol Kicinski
(Thomas Dunne Books - St. Martin's Press) \$26.99

1 teaspoon baking powder
12 ounces bittersweet chocolate chips (12-ounce bag)
16 tablespoons (2 sticks) unsalted butter
1 cup sugar
3 large eggs, lightly beaten
1 1/2 teaspoons instant espresso powder
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

Caramel nut topping:

1 cup heavy whipping cream
6 tablespoons (3/4 stick) unsalted butter
1 teaspoon kosher or fine sea salt
1/4 cup corn syrup
1/4 cup water

1 1/2 cups salted, dry-roasted peanuts

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Lightly spray a 13-by-9-inch baking dish with gluten-free, nonstick cooking spray.

In a medium mixing bowl, whisk together the brown rice flour, salt and baking powder.

In a heatproof bowl set over barely simmering water – the bottom of the bowl should not touch the water – melt the chocolate and the butter. Stir until the chocolate is fully melted and the mixture is combined and glossy. Stir in the sugar, then the eggs, flour mixture, instant espresso powder, and vanilla. Pour the batter into the prepared baking dish and bake for 30 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the middle comes out clean. Do not overbake!

While the brownies are baking, prepare the caramel. Heat the cream, butter and salt in a small saucepan, stirring occasionally, until the cream is hot and the butter is fully melted.

In a large, straight-sided saucepan, combine the sugar, corn syrup and water and cook over medium heat until the mixture turns an amber color (like a new copper penny), about 6 minutes. Do not stir the mixture while it cooks; gently swirl the pan only as often as necessary to melt the sugar and make sure the mixture colors evenly. Take the pan off the heat and carefully pour in the warm cream mixture while whisking. The mixture may splatter as you add the cream so be careful not to burn yourself. Return the pan to the heat

and cook gently for 5 minutes, stirring. Let the mixture cool a little.

When the brownies are done, let them cool for 10 to 15 minutes (you want them warm to the touch but not hot), then pour the warm caramel over the top. Top evenly with the chopped peanuts and refrigerate for about an hour to set the layers. Remove the brownies from the refrigerator and let set at room temperature for about half an hour; this will make cutting easier. Cut into 12 3-inch squares with a sharp knife. If you want bite-size brownies, it is easier to cut large squares, remove them from the pan with a spatula, and then cut into quarters on a cutting board.

Makes: 12

Nutrition information per brownie: 731 calories (56 percent from fat), 47 grams fat (25 grams saturated, 16 grams monounsaturated), 128 milligrams cholesterol, 9 grams protein, 75 grams carbohydrates, 4 grams fiber, 444 milligrams sodium.