

Buttercup Squash Nectar with Spiced Rum, Açai Berries, Fromage Blanc

By Pamela Hunt-Cloyd | Published Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2009



Recipe by Chef Bernard Guillas, executive chef, the Marine Room

My grandmother was the root of this madness I would say, this passion for food. I lived with her in Brittany until I was six and she was always in the garden. We had a beautiful orchard, hens, and rabbits. Fresh eggs every morning — it was really fantastic. We had three apiaries and an herb garden: you could almost touch the flavor of the lemon thyme and sage.

Every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, the family would gather at my grandmother's farmhouse. I have a very crazy family. They have such a passion for food and a joie de vivre. We rarely bought anything at all from the market. Most everything came from the land or the sea. At low tide on the coast of Brittany, we would harvest mussels, crabs, cockles, and shrimp. When those big tides came in they would all go on the streets where they set up a big pot to cook the fish and a table for the bottles of wine — the bottles of wine! Only in France can you do something like this. So you see, I started to cook at a very early age and what I learned was flavor.

When I was 19 years old, I went to French Guiana to work at a restaurant located near the French Guiana Space Centre. It was my first time out of Europe and I was in the middle of the Amazon. I discovered a very different lifestyle and I loved the blend of Creole, Brazilian, and European. That experience really started to shape my approach to food and ingredients and even the style of cooking. I had the great fortune to live in the Amazon for three weeks with the Samaraka tribe. Talk about being humbled... It was amazing. It gave me a different perspective on life. It was Grass Roots 101. Our running water was the Amazon River and mosquitoes were the size of hummingbirds, but that's the way it was. What was interesting to me is the relationship the natives have for the plants and animals. And the respect. Those three weeks opened my eyes to what life was all about.

When I went back to Brittany I knew I had the [travel] bug. I thought, *I cannot stay in France. I've got to see the world.* Then I received a letter from Chef Pierre Chambrin at Maison Blanche [in Washington, D.C.] who said I had a job with him if I wanted it. I worked with Pierre for four years. When he went to the White House, I visited him many, many times while he was the executive chef for Bush senior [George H.W. Bush].

Once, Bush senior came to San Diego and he was staying at the U.S. Grant Hotel, where I was working. One morning he came in for breakfast and the Secret Service guys told me not to talk to the president. But I was, like, "I know the guy." So I said, "Bonjour, Mr. President," and Bush said, "I know you," because Chef Pierre and Bush were really good friends.

The thing I love to do when I am not working is gather with my friends and have a nice barbeque and open a bottle of wine. Very important: always cook with a good bottle of wine. One other thing I really like to do — it's therapy — is to grow tomatoes and herbs. At the end of the day you look at your tomatoes. You look at your herbs. You open a bottle of wine and it's just fantastic.

This recipe for squash soup is from my new cookbook *Flying Pan*, which I wrote with Ron Oliver. It will come out in October. The recipe uses açai berries. For centuries, indigenous Indian tribes in the Amazon River basin have used the açai berry, a rainforest fruit known for its healing powers.

INGREDIENTS (serves 6)

Squash Nectar

2 3-pound kabocha squash, halved, seeded

2 tablespoons brown sugar

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

1/2 cup minced shallots

1/8 teaspoon each ground cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, cayenne pepper

1 cup dry vermouth

2 quarts vegetable stock

1 stalk lemongrass, split

2 tablespoons maple syrup

1 teaspoon grated fresh ginger

1/4 cup heavy cream

Sea salt and freshly ground white pepper to taste

HOW TO DO IT

Preheat oven to 350°F. Place squash on baking sheet, cut side up. Sprinkle flesh with brown sugar. Bake 35 minutes or until tender. Remove from oven. Cool. Scoop flesh from shell. Set aside. Melt butter in large pot over medium heat. Add shallots. Cook 2 minutes without browning, stirring often. Add cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, and cayenne pepper. Cook 1 minute, stirring often. Pour in vermouth. Bring to simmer. Add squash, stock, and lemongrass. Simmer 25 minutes. Discard lemongrass. Puree soup in blender until smooth. Strain through sieve into pot. Whisk in maple syrup, ginger, and cream. Bring back to simmer. Season with salt and white pepper.

Presentation

1/4 cup açai berries

1/4 cup apple juice

3 tablespoons vanilla spiced rum

6 teaspoons fromage blanc

6 sprigs chervil

In small bowl, soak açai berries in apple juice for 10 minutes. Remove berries. Ladle prepared squash nectar into warm soup cups. Drizzle with rum. Spoon a teaspoon of fromage blanc in center of each cup. Garnish with açai berries and chervil.

Ingredients notes:

Dried açai berries can be found at Whole Foods, health-food stores, and other gourmet groceries. Look for fromage blanc at the same sources and at cheese stores. If unavailable, substitute Greek yogurt (Trader Joe's carries it), Quark, or in a pinch, Mexican queso fresco stirred with a little yogurt or sour cream until smooth. Lacking vanilla spiced rum, add a drop or two of vanilla to the recipe measurement of any reasonably good light rum.