



# You can do it: Master the souffle

Mastering this fluffy French dish will earn you a badge of distinction

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There's a mystique about soufflés.

People believe that they're tricky to make. That you need special dishes to make them. That you can't open the oven door while they're baking or the soufflés will fall flatter than pancakes. All of these beliefs, unfortunately, are more or less true. But the pancake part is a slight exaggeration.

Making a perfect soufflé takes practice. It is, as someone has said, "the parallel parking of culinary skills." But if you have the will and acquire the skill to make a soufflé, this much is for sure: You'll have everyone at the table convinced that you are one heck of a great cook.

If you haven't the necessary practice and patience, the soufflé is a dish best left to professionals at a French restaurant that really knows its stuff. One such place that's opening soon in Dallas is Rise No. 1, a bistro with an entire menu of soufflés, both sweet and savory, overseen by French-born chef Cherif Brahmī.

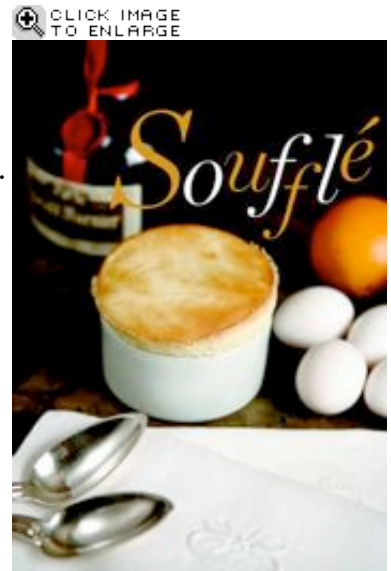
Chef Brahmī's partners in the Inwood Village enterprise, Mark Maguire and Hedda Gioia Dowd, believe the time has come for soufflés to take their place in Dallas' culinary pantheon.

"Soufflés have always been regarded as a kind of holy grail – a special-occasion dish," Mr. Maguire says. "They're thought of as really fancy type food. I think when people understand we can produce them in a short amount of time, they'll be intrigued enough to check it out.

"The other thing is: It's very light food," Mr. Maguire adds. "We're in the land of the giant steakhouse, but I believe there's a very strong and underserved market for lighter fare. And these are soufflés that can be ordered for lunch or for a weekday dinner, not reserved for a special occasion."

What is a soufflé?

It's a classic French baked dish, made light and fluffy with a combination of egg yolks, beaten egg whites, milk, flour, butter and other flavoring elements, and it's served hot from the oven.



EVANS  
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A soufflé may be savory – that is, it can be served as a main or side dish. Or, with the addition of sugar and flavorings such as lemon, chocolate or Grand Marnier, it may become an ethereal dessert. A sweet soufflé may be eaten plain, garnished with *crème anglaise*, or spiked with a small amount of liqueur or warm chocolate sauce poured through a small hole poked in the crust.

There are two main elements in any soufflé.

One is the base, a flavored custard or cream sauce containing egg yolks, and sometimes a butter-and-flour roux. It also may contain fruit or vegetable purées. The other is the egg-white mixture, which is beaten with salt or sugar until it forms soft peaks, like lightly whipped cream.

The egg whites should be handled gently, but speedily, as they are folded into the base. They provide the airiness that gives the soufflé "lift" as it bakes.

Speaking of baking, this much is true: You should not keep opening the oven door to check on a soufflé. This is why modern ovens have interior lights and windows.

When it stops rising and is delicately browned, the soufflé should be done. Only the center should jiggle after the soufflé has stopped rising.

If you must open the oven door, do so only once, and do it quickly. The oven temperature will drop if you keep letting air in, and that's death for something as delicate as a soufflé.

For the definitive judgment on a cheese soufflé, *Cook's Illustrated* recommends taking an instant-read thermometer and sliding it through the side of the soufflé's top. If it reads 170 F, it's time to remove and serve.

## The dish

Do you need special dishes to make soufflés? Yes.

The experts at *Cook's Illustrated* say you'll need a 2-quart soufflé dish, a round casserole with straight sides, to make a soufflé serving four or more people.

These aren't expensive. Crate & Barrel, for example, sells them for \$9.95 apiece.

To make individual soufflés, you'll need smaller dishes: a set of straight-sided "tall" ramekins, roughly 4 inches deep. These are made in different sizes, usually holding 10 to 12 ounces. Like larger soufflé dishes, the small ones often have ribbed or fluted exteriors.

You can buy smaller ones, too, but large, deep ramekins are typical for most soufflé recipes. Because soufflés rise so much, they will overflow a shallow dish.

Save baby ramekins for flan, pudding or *crème brûlée*.

## Nothing but the best

Are soufflés tricky? They do require precise timing, careful measurements and a fair amount of practice.

"You want your ingredients to be the best," says Jason Weaver, executive chef of the French Room at the Adolphus hotel. "The freshest eggs, for example. Never substituting orange-flavored liqueur for Grand Marnier."

He and pastry chef Lois Arguello love to come up with unusual soufflés in addition to the French Room's offerings of chocolate, hazelnut and Grand Marnier. They made pumpkin soufflé for Thanksgiving; a peppermint soufflé was on the menu at Christmas. They had a PB&J soufflé once. Chef Weaver also recalls a soufflé made with yuzu, a Japanese citrus fruit with a distinctive lemon-lime flavor.

But, for the soufflé neophyte, it's best to start simply. And "always do a test drive," chef Weaver advises. Meaning: It's wise to practice a good deal before you plan to impress a dinner party by serving a soufflé.

"It's a preparation where measurements are important, and technique is important," chef Weaver says. He feels that it helps to have someone show you how to prep a soufflé, a more experienced cook to coach you through "until you get an eye for it."

One last piece of advice: The soufflé is not a forgiving dish that will come out of the oven and wait patiently while you open and pour the next bottle of wine. Guests should be seated before you bring the masterpiece out of the oven.

A soufflé is the very definition of "serve immediately."