Recipe for Dobos Torte

What is Dobos Torte? Quoting Wikipedia “. . . a Hungarian sponge cake layered with chocolate buttercream and topped with caramel.” The layered pastry is named after its inventor, Hungarian chef József C. Dobos, a delicatessen owner in Budapest. In the late 1800s, he decided to create a cake that would last longer than other pastries in an age when cooling techniques were limited. The round sides of the cake are coated with ground hazelnuts, chestnuts, walnuts, or almonds, and the hardened caramel top helps to prevent drying out, for a longer shelf life. Dobos torte was first introduced at the National General Exhibition of Budapest in 1885; Emperor Franz Joseph I and Empress Elisabeth were among the first to taste it. The cake soon became popular throughout Europe, both for its durability through shipping and for its unique appearance. With its flat, shiny, caramel glazed top, it was simple but elegant, as opposed to the more intricate cakes of the age.

Dobas Torte is undoubtedly the most famous of all Hungarian pastries. Hungarians are inordinately fond of pastries and have invented dozens of them. As a child of Holocaust survivors growing up in Detroit, my mother and her Hungarian friends were each known for the pastry they made best. In those circles entertaining with coffee and pastries was a highly competitive sport. To prepare for this contest I called one of the best of her pastry-making friends for advice on making Dobos Torte. She warned me that it is very hard to make. Ironically, while Dobos’s intention was to create a durable pastry, even with modern refrigeration it doesn’t keep that well. After a couple of days in the fridge the chocolate buttercream seeps up through the caramel glaze. It is also difficult to scale up from the original size, about nine inches in diameter, to something that could serve 200 people. The problem with the scaling up is that baking the sponge layers in big sheets results in crisp, wafer-like texture near the edges before the center is finished baking. The sponge layers are supposed to be soft. The sponge has very little cake flour, a just half cup for an entire 9-inch torte. All of the lift in the sponge comes from beaten egg whites. This torte is meant for lovers of chocolate, butter, and sugar. It has just enough of the sponge to hold the chocolate buttercream in place.

My solution to the scaling problem relies on the magic of silicone. I could bake pan-sized sponge layers on silicone baking mats. Even though the edges all hardened, I could trim off the dry parts and still have a good sponge.

The recipe below is for the original small torte. If you are serving a crowd just multiply the ingredients by five or so and buy lots of silicone baking mats. Incidentally, the word “dobos” means drum in Hungarian. The round version of this torte looks like a drum.

Ingredients:

5 extra-large eggs separated
Pinch of salt
½ cup of granulated sugar
1/3 cup of granulated sugar
½ cup of cake flour
4 ounces of unsalted butter melted
½ a C of chopped nuts (unsalted), either almonds, hazelnuts, or walnuts

Instructions:
1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees Fahrenheit. Whip the eggs whites with 1 T of ice water and the pinch of salt until stiff
2. Add the egg yolks one at a time, beating for a full minute after each egg
3. Add the ½ cup of sugar a spoon at a time while continuing the beating
(Note, this step is much easier using a stand mixer with a whisk attachment set to the lowest speed)
4. using just the metal bottom of a 9-inch springform, butter it generously on one side and pour the egg batter on top. Spread with a spatula to even it out. Aim for a quarter inch thick.
5. Bake in the oven until golden brown. It will take about ten minutes. The torte requires six sponge layers. If you have more than one springform pan of the same size you can do more sponge layers at once.
6. cover the finished layers with wax paper to retain moisture.
7. Make the chocolate filling (see below)
8. Set aside the best-looking layer to use under the caramel glaze. Spread melted butter on a granite countertop or a marble slab. Put the chosen layer on the buttered surface.
9. Spread the chocolate buttercream using an icing spatula until 1/8 inch thick one layer at a time, and then stack the layers. Frost the sides of the stacked torte with the chocolate buttercream. While the chocolate buttercream is still soft, push chopped up nuts into the chocolate buttercream on the sides of the torte until they are covered. Pour the remaining chocolate buttercream into a pastry bag with a number six tip.
10. Melt the 1/3 C sugar in a stainless steel sauté pan (it is hard to tell the color of the caramel with a non-stick pan). Stir the sugar as it melts with a flat-tipped wooden spoon. As soon as the color of the sugar is golden brown (be careful, the sugar can turn black very quickly and set off your smoke alarm) spoon the caramel onto the chosen layer. Before it hardens, use a buttered knife to score the caramel all the way through so that the cake pieces can be cut without cracking up the caramel. The caramel will harden in less than a minute. If you are making a big sheet of Dobos Torte you will need help with this scoring to finish before it hardens, especially if you want many small pieces.
11. When the top layer is cool place it on top of the rest of the cake. Pipe a decorative of the chocolate buttercream around the edge of the torte.
12. Cool the cake in a refrigerator for at least 3 hours. The caramel top will prevent the torte from drying out in the fridge. Keep the cake in the fridge until it is ready to serve as the chocolate buttercream will melt if it gets too warm.

13. Use a wet knife to cut the cake.

Chocolate Buttercream

2-inch section of a vanilla bean (I have tried both a vanilla bean and pure vanilla extract. The bean tastes better)

¾ C of powdered sugar

6 oz of unsalted butter, softened slowly to room temperature

3 T of strong espresso

1 egg

3 oz of semi-sweet chocolate (Whole Foods on Main Street carries Valrhona Chocolate for baking. It is really good.)

1. split the vanilla bean section lengthwise and scrap out the contents into the powdered sugar

2. mix the sugar, butter, espresso, and the egg with a whisk in a stand mixer (this would take ages done by hand). The mixture should be smooth.

3. melt the chocolate in the top of a double boiler and pour into the sugar/butter/espresso/egg until fully incorporated.

4. refrigerate for 15 minutes before using