

Almond Semolina Cake Soaked in a Honey-Citrus Syrup

Shamali

Shamali is a luscious syrup-soaked almond and semolina cake that is popular throughout the East Mediterranean. This moist cake fragrant with orange blossom water is made with ground mastic which adds a pine-scented depth. Delightful served with coffee or as a spectacular finale with whipped cream and fresh berries that helps balance the intense sweetness.

For the syrup:

1 cup caster (superfine) sugar
1 cup clear honey
1¼ cups water
1 small cinnamon stick
1 tbsp fresh lemon juice
a 2.5cm (1in) strip of lemon zest

For the cake:

4 eggs, separated
¾ cup caster sugar
½ cup vegetable oil, plus extra for brushing
¾ cup plain (all-purpose) flour
½ cup fine semolina
2 heaped tsp baking powder
170G (6oz) cup unblanched almonds, finely ground
1 piece of mastic, ground with 1 tsp sugar
½ tsp ground cinnamon

For the topping:

30 whole blanched almonds, toasted

You will need:

a rectangular or oval 30x22cm (12x9in) ovenproof dish that is at least 6.5cm (2½in) deep.

Prepare the syrup: Combine the sugar, honey and water in a small, heavy-based pan. Bring to a boil, stirring constantly, until the sugar has dissolved. Add the cinnamon stick, lemon juice and zest. Boil for 5 minutes without stirring. Let cool and discard the cinnamon stick and lemon zest.

Preheat the oven to 180°C (350°F). Lightly oil the dish and dust with 1 tbsp flour. Place in the fridge.

Make the cake: In the bowl of an electric mixer beat together the egg yolks and sugar on high speed, until pale and thick. Beat in the oil.

In a medium-sized bowl combine the flour, semolina, baking powder, almonds, mastic and cinnamon.

Whisk the egg whites in a clean bowl until soft peaks form. In two batches, gently fold into the egg and sugar mixture. Then fold in the dry ingredients, scraping down the sides of the bowl, until well incorporated. Pour the batter into the prepared dish, smoothing it out evenly. Bake in the centre of the oven for 35 minutes or until golden brown and a skewer inserted in the cake comes out clean. Remove the cake from the oven*.

Reduce the oven temperature to 150°C (300°F). While the cake is still in the dish, cut deeply into approximately 4cm (1½in) diamond shapes with a sharp knife. Gently spoon the cooled syrup evenly over the entire hot cake. Press a halved toasted almond onto the centre of each diamond shape. Return to the oven for 5 minutes for the syrup to be absorbed. Let stand at room temperature for at least 2 hours for the syrup to soak in. Serve at room temperature either from the dish or arrange the cut pieces on a cake platter.

Stella's Hints:

- *To freeze the cooled baked cake: Seal the cake in the dish in plastic wrap and freeze for up to 1 month. To serve, defrost, then make the hot syrup. Cut the cake deeply into diamond-shapes and spoon over the hot syrup. Top with almonds.
- The finished shamali keeps for a week covered with plastic wrap in the fridge.