
Bûche aux marrons - Chestnut log cake

In loving memory of my grandparents, Paul and Jeanette Bechetoille

Baking and eating a Bûche de Noel (a cake made to look like a tree log) is a European tradition for the holidays. It comes from an old pagan tradition to cut a large tree trunk and to burn it during Christmas Eve inside the cremini. The trunk would need to burn very slowly and last up to New Year's Eve. The duration of the burn would be an indication of the harvest for the next year. In the middle of the 19th century, with electricity ubiquity, the tradition evolved and a log-shaped cake is eaten instead.

Well before my birth in 1988, my grandparents on my mother's side would make a chestnut Buche every year for the holidays, which has polarized my extended family for decades. A handful of people (me included) are absolutely in love with this dessert and we look forward to the holidays just to have the occasion of eating the log, while the majority despise it, considering this dessert too rustic. That being said, be warned, the persons hating it would never let their share to those who love it!



Paul "Bon Papa" Bechetoille (1919-2015) ready to cut the massive buche for all the family while Jeanette "Bonne Maman" Bechetoille (1921-2005) is holding her butter and sugar-free personal buche! (Valence, France - December 24, 2004)



The tradition continues with this buche made in our CT home in 2017.

Ingredients

1.5 lb of chestnuts
1 stick of butter

3.5 oz of dark unsweetened chocolate
3/4 cup of granulated white sugar

Method

With a sharp knife, make a small cut into the fresh chestnuts and place them into boiling water for 10 to 15 minutes. Drain and peel chestnuts when they are cool enough to be handled. Cook the peeled chestnuts in boiling water for an additional 15 minutes (chestnuts will start breaking down in smaller bits).

Drain and puree the chestnuts. You can keep a bit of the cooking water to eventually add back if the puree is too dry. If you completely puree the chestnuts, your buche will be very smooth, but I like to roughly puree them to have some chestnut chunks left in my buche.

In a saucepan on low heat (or double boiler if you are so inclined), melt the chocolate, butter and sugar and add it to the chestnut puree as soon as all the sugar is dissolved. You can vary the ratio chestnut/chocolate by increasing the quantity of chocolate if you would rather have a more chocolaty buche.

Mix well and store in a covered bowl overnight in the refrigerator. The mixture will look liquid at first, but it will slowly set overnight.

The next day, the mixture should be malleable and will hold a shape. Transfer mixture onto a large oiled sheet of parchment paper. Rock back and forth lengthwise to form a log. Once you are satisfied with your shape, use the back of a fork to gently mark the log and give a bark texture. Cut the two extremities and use the scraps to form a branch on top of the log. You can use walnuts to decorate your buche.

Serve with a vanilla custard.

I always eat this dessert thinking of my grandparents,
and I never skip a year making this buche.