

Vermont Cheddar Soufflé

Completely foolproof, and much easier than you may think, cheese soufflé makes a wonderful supper when accompanied by a salad and good bread (I like to serve it with *Sweet and Salty Bacon Corn Bread*, page 224). Don't be put off by the length of this recipe—all those details are there to ensure you won't fail.

I find the soufflé tastes best when made with four-year-old Grafton cheddar. If you can't find that, look for a sharp cheddar and you'll get similar results.

Using a real ceramic soufflé dish makes a difference here and is not a big investment. Note that the dish is first buttered and coated with cheese, then chilled while you prepare the rest of the ingredients. This helps the soufflé to rise impressively. To ensure that everyone gets a good view of your expertise, call folks to the table before you take the soufflé out of the oven!

SERVES 4 TO 6

3 tablespoons unsalted butter

½ cup finely grated Parmigiano-Reggiano

3 tablespoons unbleached all-purpose flour

1 cup whole milk

1 cup sharp cheddar cheese, grated on the biggest holes of a box grater

Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 teaspoon finely chopped fresh tarragon or dried tarragon

6 pastured eggs

Pinch of cream of tartar

Heat the oven to 400 degrees. Using your fingers or a bit of the butter wrapper, grease the bottom and sides of the soufflé dish well with 1 tablespoon of the butter. Dust the sides and bottom of the dish with the Parmigiano-Reggiano, turning the dish and shaking it so that the surfaces are well-coated. Put the dish in the refrigerator to chill.

Melt the remaining 2 tablespoons butter in a saucepan. When it is bubbling, whisk in the flour to make a roux. Cook the paste for 1 minute, then slowly add the milk, whisking or stirring constantly, and bring the mixture to a boil. The paste will become thick; continue to cook for another full minute—it should be smooth and glossy. Remove the pan from the heat and add the cheddar, stirring to help it to melt. Season with salt and pepper, and add, stirring, the tarragon. Allow the mixture to cool slightly.

Separate the eggs into yolks and whites, using two bowls. Add ⅓ of the yolks to the cooling sauce mixture and whisk rapidly. Add the sauce mixture back into the rest of the yolks and continue to whisk. Return the mixture to the pot, and using the lowest possible heat, bring the enriched sauce to a simmer, stirring constantly for no more than a few seconds (I count to 10). Pour the sauce into a clean bowl to stop it from cooking further, and let it sit for 10 minutes.

In a spotlessly clean and grease-free bowl, beat the egg whites with the cream of tartar until they are very stiff, using a stand mixer, hand mixer, or balloon whisk. The peaks should easily hold their form when cut with a beater or knife. Pour about a third of the egg white mixture into the cooled sauce and stir together to lighten the sauce. Now, carefully, fold in the remaining whites, using a silicon spatula and a light folding motion to ensure that you don't deflate the bubbles. Err on the side of underfolding—inflation is more important than thorough mixing.

Scrape the mixture into the prepared soufflé dish and run your thumb around the edge of the dish, creating a trough along the side of the soufflé dish (this will help it to rise). Put the soufflé in the oven, close the door, and immediately turn the heat down to 375 degrees. Bake for 30 minutes and serve at once.