

Salted Orange Caramels Dipped in Coffee Chocolate

This is the grand prize winning recipe as well as first place winner in the chocolate candies category. From Anne Brill, 69, of Cary. Her advice: Making caramels can be tricky, but if you follow these cardinal rules, you will be successful. Avoid heat in the higher ranges; brush down sugar crystals from the side of the pan when making the syrup; try not to stir the mixtures; watch your candy thermometer vigilantly; and do not make on a humid day.

Cooking spray

3/4 cup heavy cream

4 tablespoons salted butter, divided and cubed, at room temperature

3/4 teaspoon orange extract

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup light corn syrup

1 cup sugar

2 tablespoons sea salt crystals

1 cup semisweet chocolate chips (I prefer semi-sweet)

1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon shortening

1 3/4 teaspoons decaffeinated instant coffee granules

Line an 8- or 9-inch square pan with aluminum foil and spray the inside with cooking spray.

Heat the cream, 2 tablespoons butter, orange extract and 1/2 teaspoon salt in a small saucepan over medium-high heat until the mixture begins to boil. Remove from heat, cover, and keep warm while you cook the syrup.

Combine corn syrup and sugar in a 4-quart heavy-duty saucepan, fitted with a candy thermometer. Heat over medium low heat and cook, stirring gently, to make sure the sugar melts smoothly. Wipe down the sides of the pan with a pastry brush dipped in hot water to dissolve any sugar crystals on the sides. Once the sugar is evenly moistened, do not stir, but swirl the pan as necessary to keep it from getting any hot spots.

Cook until the syrup reaches 310 degrees. The mixture will turn a deep, golden amber. To get an accurate reading while the syrup is cooking, tilt the saucepan to make sure the bulb of the thermometer is fully submerged.

Turn off the heat and using a clean spoon, carefully stir in the warm cream mixture (mixture will violently bubble), until smooth.

Turn the heat to medium-low and cook to 260 degrees. This stage requires patience and cannot be rushed. As it cooks, do not stir; swirl the pan if necessary. Be vigilant as the thermometer approaches 260 degrees.

Remove the pan from the heat, lift out the thermometer, and use a clean spoon to stir in the remaining 2 tablespoons butter until melted and smooth.

Pour the mixture into prepared loaf pan. Set on a wire rack and let cool completely. Once cool, lift out the caramel, peel away foil, and cut caramel with a long, sharp knife into 1-inch-by-1-inch pieces and place them on wax paper.

Measure 2 tablespoons sea salt and put in a zip-top plastic bag and seal. Use meat tenderizer or back of spoon to gently break larger crystals so they are all about the same size, but still large enough to handle easily. Set aside.

Place the chocolate chips and shortening in the top of a double boiler with the bottom pan filled half way up with water, being careful not to have the hot water touch the bottom of the top pan. Heat the chips and shortening over low heat and do not let any water touch the chocolate. Stir occasionally until the chocolate is melted. Add the instant coffee granules and stir, getting the mixture as smooth as possible. (Some granules may still appear, but dipping will be fine.) Taste at this point to determine if you prefer more coffee flavor in which case add 1 teaspoon more at a time to taste. Remove from heat but keep pan over hot water.

Using your fingers, dip each caramel halfway into the chocolate mixture, covering half of each piece in chocolate. Dip all the pieces and place them on wax paper to set. After all the caramels are dipped, use either your fingers (or tweezers if you prefer) to place a small row of sea salt crystals along the edge of the chocolate across the middle of the caramel. If any chocolate edges are uneven, after the chocolate sets, use a sharp knife to square up the sides.

Storage: These caramels can be placed individually in paper candy cups for boxing or wrapped in waxed paper. They should not be stacked without waxed paper separating them or they could stick together. Store in an air-tight container in a cool place and they will keep for about one month.

Yield: 18-24 pieces