

Salt and Serenity

Caramel Honeycomb Birthday Cake

This cake has several components, so you might want to spread the work out over several days. Make the salted caramel sauce first. It makes more than you need for this cake, but the extra will keep in the fridge for months. The buttercream and the honeycomb can be made a day or two ahead of time. Just let the buttercream come to room temperature before spreading it on the cake layers. Make the cake layers on the day you plan to serve it.

The recipe for the cake is very slightly adapted from Brian Hart Hoffman's book *"Bake From Scratch."*

The salted caramel sauce is from Stella Park at Serious Eats.

The salted caramel buttercream recipe is from Allyson Bobbitt and Sarah Bell's book, *"Bobbette and Belle."*

The honeycomb recipe is adapted from Zero George's executive chef Chef Vinson Petrillo.

You will need a kitchen scale and a candy thermometer to make this cake.

Serves 10-12

Salted Caramel Sauce:

- ½ cup water
- 248 grams granulated sugar
- ½ teaspoon Diamond Crystal kosher salt
- 1 cup 35% cream
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract or vanilla bean paste

Cake:

- 340 grams unsalted butter, removed from fridge 30 minutes before baking
- 825 grams granulated sugar
- 6 large eggs
- 1 ½ teaspoons vanilla extract or vanilla bean paste
- 625 grams all purpose flour
- 2 ¼ teaspoons kosher salt
- 1 ½ teaspoons baking powder
- 1 ½ teaspoons baking soda
- 1 ½ cups buttermilk

Salted Caramel Buttercream:

8 large egg whites

396 grams granulated sugar

908 grams unsalted butter (2 pounds), cut into 1 inch cubes, room temperature

2 teaspoons vanilla bean paste or vanilla extract

1 teaspoon Diamond Crystal kosher salt

½ cup salted caramel sauce (recipe above)

Chocolate Dipped Honeycomb:

297 grams granulated sugar

½ cup water

63 grams honey

104 grams light or white corn syrup

¼ teaspoon kosher salt

12 grams baking soda, sifted

225 grams bittersweet or semi-sweet chocolate, chopped finely

Fleur de sel or other flaky sea salt

1. **Make Salted Caramel Sauce:** In a 3-quart stainless steel pot, combine water, sugar, and salt over medium heat. Stir with a fork until syrup comes to a boil, about 4 minutes, then simmer without stirring until syrup is honey-colored, roughly 6 minutes, shaking and swirling as needed to ensure even caramelization. Continue cooking until syrup is light to medium amber, a minute more. Immediately add cream and reduce heat to medium-low.
2. Stirring constantly with a heat-resistant spatula to knock back the foam, simmer until caramel registers 225°F on a candy thermometer, about 3 minutes. Transfer to a heat-resistant container, stir in vanilla extract and cool to room temperature. Caramel will be runny while warm, but thicken as it cools, turning just a little chewy when cold. Refrigerate up to 1 month in an airtight container. Bring to room temperature before using.
3. **Make cake:** Preheat oven to 350°F. Spray 3 (9 inch) round cake pans with baking spray. Line bottom of pans with parchment paper and spray again.
4. In the bowl of a stand mixer, fitted with the paddle attachment, beat butter and sugar at medium speed for about 3-4 minutes, until fluffy. Stop twice during beating to scrape down sides of bowl. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Beat in vanilla.
5. In a medium sized bowl, whisk together flour, salt, baking soda and baking powder. Gradually add flour mixture to butter mixture, alternating with

buttermilk, beginning and ending with flour mixture, beating just until combined after each addition. Divide batter evenly between pans.

6. Bake until a wooden skewer inserted into center of each pan comes out clean, about 23-27 minutes. Let cool in pans for 10 minutes. Remove cakes from pans and let cool completely on wire cooling racks.
7. Make buttercream: In a medium saucepan, bring an inch or two of water to a simmer. Place egg whites and sugar in a large stainless steel mixing bowl. Place over simmering water and whisk gently until mixture registers 140°F on a candy thermometer. Immediately pour egg white mixture into the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment.
8. Whisk on medium high speed until the egg whites have doubled in volume, hold medium peaks and have cooled to room temperature, about 10-12 minutes. The best way to gauge this by putting the inside of your wrist to the outside of the bowl. It's more accurate than your hands. Switch from the whisk to the paddle attachment.
9. Turn the mixer to medium low speed and slowly add butter, a few cubes at a time, increasing the speed to medium high after each addition and beating until the butter is fully incorporated before adding more. Resist the temptation to dump all the butter in at once. Be patient. At one point, it will appear as though the buttercream has curdles. Don't panic, keep going and it will come together again soon. Once all the butter has been added, continue to beat on medium-high until buttercream is light and fluffy, 1-2 minutes. Stop mixer and scrape down sides and bottom of bowl. Add vanilla extract and salt and beat at medium speed for an additional 2 minutes.
10. With the mixer on medium speed, add ½ cup of salted caramel sauce in a slow steady stream until fully combined. Stop to scrape down sides of bowl, then beat for 2 more minutes. Buttercream is ready to use immediately or can be stored in an airtight container in fridge for 1 week or freezer for 3 months. Bring to room temperature before using.
11. **Make honeycomb:** Measure all of your ingredients before you start. Line a baking sheet with parchment and have it nearby. A silicon spatula also comes in handy. If you have a 5 or 7 quart enamelled cast iron pot (such as Le Creuset) now is the time to bust it out. If not, any heavy large pot will work, but if you burn the sugar, like I did the first time I made this. enamelled cast iron is much easier to clean.

12. Pour sugar, water, honey, corn syrup and salt into pot. Heat the sugar mixture to 295°F, stirring it with a silicon spatula to ensure even caramelization. It will take about 3-5 minutes. Do not walk away.
13. Immediately take the pot off the heat and quickly stir in the vanilla extract and baking soda. The mixture will foam up quite a bit; continue stirring until the baking soda completely dissolves. Quickly pour the honeycomb mixture onto a sheet of parchment. Allow it to cool completely before touching. Once cool, break it into irregular triangular shaped shards.
14. In a medium saucepan, bring an inch or two of water to a simmer. Place $\frac{3}{4}$ of the chocolate in a large stainless steel mixing bowl. Place over simmering water. Stir until chocolate is just melted. Remove from over water and add remaining $\frac{1}{4}$ of chocolate. Stir until all the chocolate is melted.
15. Dip one end of each piece of honeycomb into the melted chocolate. Lay dipped honeycomb on parchment lined baking sheet. While chocolate is still wet, lightly sprinkle with sea salt. Continue until all the pieces are dipped. Let sit at room temperature until chocolate sets. Store honeycomb in an airtight container at room temperature.
16. Assemble cake: Place a dab of buttercream in the center of the cake turntable or plate. Lay a 9-inch cardboard cake circle over top of the frosting, to hold it into place. Lay your first layer on top of the cardboard circle, top side up. Spoon a large dollop of the buttercream in the center of the cake layer. Using a large offset spatula, start moving the filling gently back and forth with light pressure while you simultaneously turn the cake stand. You will see the filling evenly spread out toward the edge of the cake layer. This takes coordination and practice but it is the easiest way to ensure an even filling that covers the whole surface of the layer without getting crumbs in it. The finished layer of filling should be $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick.
17. Place the next layer on top, this time cut side down. This will allow you to smooth your filling on a smooth uncut surface. Smooth more buttercream over this layer, just as you did with the first, again ending up with a $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick layer of frosting.
18. Place the third layer on top, cut side down. Smooth out any buttercream that has oozed out the sides with your offset spatula.
19. Give the whole outside of the cake (both top and sides) a "crumb coat". Using a clean offset spatula, apply a very thin see-through layer of chocolate

buttercream over the entire top and sides of the cake. Chill the cake on the cake turntable in the fridge for 30 minutes to allow the crumb coat to set.

20. Remove cake from fridge. Place a large mound of buttercream on the top of the cake and use the same technique you used to spread the filling, but this time allow the buttercream to extend about ½ inch beyond the edge of the cake. Hold the blade of your offset spatula at a slight angle over the top of the cake and rotate the cake stand to smooth out the top.
21. Use your offset spatula to apply lots of buttercream to the sides of the cake. Really lay it on thick. Place your bench scraper at a 90° angle, with the blade barely touching the cake and the bottom edge resting tightly against the cake stand. Angle the bench scraper toward you and begin turning the cake turntable. Don't apply too much pressure at the beginning. You will begin to collect extra buttercream on your scraper while seeing the buttercream smooth out. Be careful not to remove too much buttercream from the sides or you will start to see the cake underneath. If this happens, trowel on more buttercream and repeat the smoothing process. As you become more comfortable with the smoothing process, you can turn the stand at a faster speed.
22. When the sides are smooth, you will notice a small wall of buttercream that has formed at the top edge of the cake. Using the edge of a clean offset spatula, push the excess buttercream towards the center of the cake.
23. Decorate top of cake with honeycomb shards.
24. Light the candles, make a wish and serve cake.