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Food

French toast Revolution

Breakfast Republic executive chef transforms the morning indulgence into a flavor-packed, decadent dining experience

STORY BY CARON GOLDEN
FOOD STYLING BY CESAR GARCIA

Did you grow up eating French toast on the weekend? Perhaps your mom or dad taught you their simple approach: beat together eggs with milk, stir in some cinnamon and nutmeg, and maybe some vanilla and a little sugar. Let slices of bread (in my family challah was the preferred bread — but definitely an egg bread) soak in the mixture. Then you melt butter in a large skillet and cook the slices until they're nice and brown. And, of course, drown the slices in maple syrup. It was a family classic.

So, it was a revelation when I learned how Breakfast Republic's executive chef Cesar Garcia makes the local chain's very decadent version—and it has inspired me to rethink how I make mine. I'm not just talking technique, but also the idea of incorporating other ingredients

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to reflect the seasons, a brunch theme, or just to play with favorite foods.

Garcia also shared Breakfast Republic's recipe for the irresistibly sticky, salty, spicy and sweet bacon they call "Jurassic Pork." Thick slices of smoked applewood bacon are dipped in a mixture of brown sugar, Spanish paprika and just a pinch of cayenne pepper, then oven baked, transforming otherwise run-of-the-mill pork into a melt-in-your-mouth experience that pairs perfectly with that French toast.

In case you still haven't been, Breakfast Republic, which now boasts nine locations in Southern California, is a breakfast/brunch fun house. The bright, quirky décor is pure experience branding, created by owner Johan Engman. Also the owner of Fig Tree Café, El Jardin and North Park Breakfast Company under the Rise and Shine Restaurant Group umbrella, Engman said he came up with the concept for Breakfast Republic after evaluating what he felt was an underserved segment of the market: breakfast.

"All of the breakfast and brunch places I knew seemed pretty much the same," he said. "And when I think back on my dining experience, it's the overall vibe of the place — the X factor — that makes it memorable and makes you want to share this experience with friends."

So, everything from human-size egg seats to oversized ceramic coffee cups and the little messages on the coffee cup bottom, like "Definitely booze in this cup," that only your companion across from you can read, to fortune cookie-like sayings on the utensil wrappers fit into Engman's Breakfast Republic sensibility.

And that extends to the menu. Sure, you could make French toast, but why not have some fun with it? Engman's mom was a fan of Elvis Presley — the Elvis who loved fried peanut butter and banana sandwiches — so why not come up with a French toast version with Bananas Foster? The menu's Shrimp & Grits Breakfast with gouda, hot sauce, sweet corn and chives was inspired by his travels to Louisiana, and the "Cluck Madame" with ham, Gruyère and béchamel sauce is a twist on the Croque Monsieur he enjoys in Paris.

Ah, but the French toast!

How about Lemon 'N' Coconut? Or Strawberry & Mascarpone? Or Banana Split? Or S'Mores? All of them have the same base: egg yolks, heavy cream, brown sugar, vanilla and — get this — spiced rum. Once Garcia added rum to the bananas foster topping, he realized that the flavor would be perfect for the French toast batter, adding a little indefinable touch of flavor. Garcia said he is going for as rich a French toast as possible, so no to egg whites and yes to heavy cream. Brioche is really buttery, and egg bread absorbs the mix well, so that's his bread of choice. He dips the bread (Bread & Cie's brioche loaves, cut into 1-inch slices) but doesn't let it soak in the batter to keep it from falling apart. And he doesn't cook the bread in butter; it's just cooked on a hot, naked skillet. Butter would add an unnecessary additional flavor. And while you may wince when you see the 24 yolks for six servings, don't skimp.

"Twenty-four eggs seem like a lot," he said, "but it gets absorbed into the slices."

Both the Mr. Presley and S'Mores French toast dishes are simple to make. The difference in the batter is that the S'Mores, of course, requires graham crackers. Garcia turns them into crumbs (smash them or pulverize in a food processor) and adds them to the batter.

For Mr. Presley you'll slather peanut butter onto one side of the cooked French toast and roll it up, then cover the rolls with the caramel bananas foster, unadorned chopped cooked bacon, and powdered sugar. For the S'Mores, you get to play with a kitchen torch to brown mini marshmallows sprinkled over the cooked French toast. Then drizzle the dish with your favorite chocolate syrup and add a sprinkling of powdered sugar.

Of course, you must have that Jurassic Bacon as an accompaniment. Just be sure you bake the bacon. Garcia explained that it's the best method. Stovetop cooking will cause it to curl and cook unevenly. Laying the bacon slices on a baking sheet covered in parchment paper will allow it to cook evenly and stay flat.

Golden is a San Diego freelance food writer and blogger.



Jurassic Pork

Makes 6 servings

18 strips of bacon
1 cup brown sugar
1 1/2 tablespoons Spanish paprika
1 pinch of cayenne pepper

Preheat oven at 350 degrees.

In a small bowl, mix together the sugar, paprika and cayenne pepper.

Place each bacon strip in the bowl, one at a time, and lightly cover with the sugar mix on all sides.

Place bacon strips on a sheet pan lined with parchment paper.

Bake in the oven for 10 minutes if using a convection oven, 15 minutes for a conventional oven. Turn the sheet pan around halfway through baking. The bacon should be crispy but not burnt.

Mr. Presley French Toast

Makes 6 servings

FRENCH TOAST
24 egg yolks
1 1/2 cups brown sugar
7 1/2 cups heavy cream
2 tablespoons vanilla extract
4 tablespoons spiced rum
12 slices brioche bread, cut into 1-inch-thick slices

TOPPING
3/4 cup butter
1 1/2 cups brown sugar
3 whole bananas
1 1/2 cups spiced rum
3 cups plain bacon, cooked and chopped
Powdered sugar (as desired)

FILLING
1 1/2 cups peanut butter (smooth recommended but crunchy is also fine)

For the French toast: In a bowl, whisk egg yolks and sugar until sugar dissolves; mix in cream, vanilla and rum. Dip brioche bread slices in the mix, making sure to cover both sides. Cook slices over medium heat (without butter or oil) on the griddle or in a pan, flipping once, until both sides are golden and the center feels firm.

For the Bananas Fosters topping: Melt butter in a pan, add sugar and cook until it dissolves and turns into caramel. Cut banana into slices and add to the pan. Move with a spatula to cover bananas with the caramel sauce. Add rum to the mix and continue cooking to evaporate the alcohol. (Note: Alcohol can be ignited by gas flames, so have a pan lid handy in case you need to extinguish flames.)

Assembly: Spread 2 tablespoons of peanut butter on one side of each cooked brioche slice. Roll the toast so that the peanut butter filling stays inside. Plate and pour banana foster mixture on top of the French toast rolls. Sprinkle with the chopped bacon and also sprinkle with powdered sugar as desired.

S'mores French Toast

Makes 6 servings

FRENCH TOAST
24 egg yolks
1 1/2 cups brown sugar
7 1/2 cups heavy cream
2 tablespoons vanilla extract
1/4 cup spiced rum
1/2 cup graham cracker crumbs
12 slices brioche bread, cut into 1-inch-thick slices

TOPPINGS
3 cups mini marshmallows
6 tablespoons chocolate sauce, such as Hershey's
Powdered sugar (as desired)

For the French toast: In a bowl, whisk egg yolks and sugar until sugar dissolves, then mix in cream, vanilla, rum and graham cracker crumbs. Dip brioche bread slices in the mix making sure to cover both sides. Cook slices over medium heat (without butter or oil) on the griddle or in a pan, flipping once, until both sides are golden and the center feels firm.

Assembly: Serve one slice on top of the other on your desired plate (2 slices per serving). Cover with 1/2 cup of marshmallows and, using a kitchen torch, toast marshmallows until golden brown. Drizzle chocolate sauce on top, and sprinkle with powder sugar as desired.



HOWARD LIPIN U-T PHOTOS
Cesar Garcia, corporate chef at Breakfast Republic, puts finishing touches on Mr. Presley French Toast.