

Crema Patisciera

2 ¼ cups whole milk
1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
Peel of 1 or 2 small lemons, cut in 1 long piece
4 large egg yolks, at room temperature
1 cup plus 2 tablespoons sugar
1/3 cup cornstarch

This simple pastry cream is delicious on its own as a pudding, but it's also extremely useful as a filling for pastries or as a tasty base for tarts. We use it often at Gangivecchio. Giovanna likes to spread it over the bottom of a cooked tart shell (Pasta Frolla) and cover the top with a single kind of fruit, such as raspberries or strawberries. But she also makes a beautiful mixed fruit tart using fresh fruits and berries of the season.

The recipe for Pasta Frolla follows.

MAKES ABOUT 2 1/2 CUPS OF PASTRY CREAM. THE RECIPE IS EASILY DOUBLED.

Over low heat, slowly bring the milk, vanilla and lemon peel to a boil in a medium, heavy-bottomed saucepan, stirring often.

Beat the egg yolks with the sugar in a medium bowl until light and fluffy. Whisk in the cornstarch and blend well.

Remove the pan from the heat and discard the lemon peel. In a slow, steady stream, whisk 3/4 cup of the hot milk into the eggs.

Slowly whisk the egg mixture into the remaining milk in the saucepan, stirring constantly. When it is thoroughly incorporated, return the pan to high heat and let the crema boil for 2 minutes, stirring constantly, until thick and creamy.

The pastry cream will keep, covered, in the refrigerator, for 2 days.

Variation For orange pastry cream, substitute orange peel for the lemon peel in the recipe.