

Today I want to tell you a holiday story full of scandal, bravery, and gingerbread.

Two years ago, I was approached by a prominent local journalist from a very well-known local publication. The request? To create an original holiday recipe to share with their readers.

I was excited. Honored. Up to the challenge. As I brainstormed ideas for my first published recipe, I drew from two recent culinary discoveries that were on the top of my favorites list: Armagnac and Fran's caramel sauce.

If you've never tried Armagnac, it is a French brandy, laced with heavenly hints of vanilla and the undeniable richness of a well-crafted liqueur. It enhances anything sweet, but particularly those with buttery caramel notes.

I love making caramel sauce from scratch, but am also pleased to have discovered a store-bought brand that would work as a sufficient substitute if I ever found myself without time to whip up a batch at home (read: the entire month of December).

I began to dream up a flavor combination of a layered dessert involving gingerbread, Fran's caramel, French Armagnac, and whipped cream (always from scratch, never from a can).

I wanted to bring my best work to the table. I wanted it to represent me as a trusted source for home cooks. I wanted it to be excellent, yet attainable. I wanted it to be the kind of recipe that people would rip out of the magazine and actually take into their kitchen.

I tested and tasted. Tested some more. Tweaked and tasted until finally I landed on what I thought was the perfect holiday dessert recipe to share with local readers.

I submitted my original piece of culinary literature and waited, eager to see the finished product in print with my name as the original author listed underneath. Maybe this would be the first of many more to come. Maybe this was a way to get my foot into the publishing world. Maybe this was a way to begin to equip home cooks with tips and tools to make cooking worth it.

The magazine arrived in my mail box. I frantically flipped to the page where I found the photograph of my Gingerbread Trifle with Armagnac Caramel staring back at me from the glossy page. I smiled. I saw my name in print and smiled again. I began to read the text of the recipe. The smile faded. Line by line I became more and more undone. I felt the room begin to spin. The blood drained from my head, my palms went sweaty, and I got a woozy feeling in my stomach.

Staring back at me was a recipe, but it was not mine.

The magazine changed my recipe. Drastically. Changed quantities. Changed ingredients. Changed methods. And all without my permission.

My sense of justice flared into action and made my cheeks hot. Worried I was being too sensitive or taking it too personally or over-reacting, I decided to see what a few other close friends thought.

I told my husband what was going on. He confirmed this seemed like a less-than-professional move on the part of the publication.

I phoned a friend who works in PR for an international company and told her the saga. She was speechless and confirmed to me that this was highly unprofessional and unethical.

I called a fellow content-creator who also confirmed to me that a publication changing an original piece of work, protected by copyright, is a huge no-no.

I had hoped someone from my inner circle would tell me to calm down and that this was not a big deal. I hoped they would tell me to take a walk and a deep breath and to go about my life leaving this behind me to fade. They all did the opposite, inciting outrage on my behalf and validating my feelings of being tricked at best and robbed at worst.

I knew what I had to do. I had to confront the giant.

I wrote a kind but firm email to the very well-known journalist who had first reached out to me. I told her my side of the situation, shared my feelings, and did so with respect and gratitude. I was not interested in burning bridges, but I was determined to stand up for my work and my name, hoping to find common ground with another woman who creates original content for a living.

Her response was as shocking as when I first saw my edited recipe. She told me in all her years as a journalist she had never had anyone complain about being featured in the pages of her magazine. She told me she expected to hear how thankful I was, not how frustrated I was that changes had been made.

I read the email, closed my computer, and walked away. I had done my part, stood up for myself, defended my work and my name, and explained my position. How she chose to respond was out of my control. She made it clear we would not be working together again.

I decided that was okay. Because more than wanting to be featured in a magazine, I want to be trusted and treated fairly. I want my original work to be given the protection it deserves when published, and I want my name to be protected by those who have the power to do so. A magazine unwilling to do that is a magazine with whom I'm not interested in collaborating.

That moment was a turning point for me in my career, both as a writer and a cook. A good friend once told me, "It's only a mistake if you don't learn from it." I definitely learned a lot of valuable lessons from this episode.

I learned to be very specific with others who want to use my content on their platform. I also learned that the people I care the most about are the fellow home-cooks, not the editors or publishers.

The silver lining of this story is that now I can share this recipe with you, in its original form, as intended. No edits have been made, and it is as delicious as it sounds.

The gingerbread comes together very quickly, full of heady spices with a moist sticky texture. The other components are easy as well. Whatever you do, make sure you use homemade whipped cream. It takes three minutes and is superior to anything from a can.

As a member of my audience, as a fellow food-lover and home-cook, I am grateful for you. For reading these words. For hopefully cooking my recipes. And for knowing that above all, the trust you place in me is a gift worth fighting giants for.

GINGERBREAD TRIFLE WITH ARMAGNAC CARAMEL
this will yield six generous trifles, or one large trifle

for the gingerbread...

1 cup boiling water
2 teaspoons baking soda
2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons ground ginger
1 1/2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon ground cloves
1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg
1/2 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons baking powder
1/4 pound (1 stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature
2/3 cup packed dark brown sugar
1 cup unsulfured molasses
2 extra-large eggs, room temperature, lightly beaten

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

Butter and flour a 9X13 inch cake pan.

In a small bowl, combine the boiling water and baking soda. Stir gently with a small spoon until combined. Set aside.

In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, ground ginger, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, salt, and baking powder until combined. Set aside.

In the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, cream the butter and brown sugar on medium speed until light and fluffy, about 5 minutes.

With the mixer on low speed, add the molasses, baking-soda mixture, and flour mixture. Stop to scrape down the edges of the bowl as needed. Add the eggs, and combine on low speed.

Pour the batter into the prepared pan and bake for 30 to 35 minutes until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Allow the cake to cool completely before slicing.

for the armagnac caramel...

1 cup high-quality jarred caramel sauce (such as Fran's)
1/4 cup Armagnac

Pour the caramel into a large glass measuring cup. If the caramel is thick, warm it for a few seconds in the microwave until it is easy to stir. Add the armagnac and stir to incorporate completely.

This can be made ahead and store in the fridge.

for the whipped cream...

2 cups heavy cream
1/4 cup granulated sugar

In the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, beat the whipped cream on medium-high speed until soft peaks form. Add the sugar and continue beating on high speed until stiff peaks form.

to assemble the truffles...

Cut the gingerbread into 1-inch cubes.

Into each bowl or glass, place a few gingerbread cubes. Drizzle the gingerbread generously with the armagnac caramel. Top with a few dollops of whipped cream. Repeat the layers twice, or as needed to fit your glass or bowl.

Alternatively, you can assemble this dessert in a large trifle dish.