

How to make Tablet, a traditional Scottish sweet

Tablet's hard to describe if you haven't had a Scottish upbringing; it's like toffee, but not chewy, it's like fudge, but more grainy. It's basically a wee bit of heaven in an otherwise dreich country. As long as you're not counting the calories.

Warning

Making tablet requires you to boil up a sugar-based mixture. Sugar boils at a much higher temperature than water, and any splashes stick to the skin and cause very painful burning. **Do not attempt to make this if you are not confident with a large pan full of very hot liquid. The author of this web page can take no responsibility for your actions if you decide to follow these instructions.**

Now that's over, this is my variation on my Great-Aunt Celie's tablet. Aunt Celie could make tablet so good it'd make you cry. Mine's nowhere near as good as hers, but it's good enough to be eagerly awaited by my officemates.

Ingredients

- 1kg white cane vanilla granulated sugar
- 1 tin (appx. 400g) sweetened condensed milk
- 100g unsalted butter
- fresh milk to damp sugar

Notes on ingredients

Sugar

I prefer cane sugar, as beet sugar can make the tablet taste a bit like turnips. Unbleached sugar works well too, but causes little crystals of dark molasses to settle out. Aunt Celie's recipe didn't add any flavouring, but I've found that vanilla makes it just that bit better. If you don't have time to make vanilla sugar, skip the added flavour altogether. It'll taste almost as good, and far better than synthetic vanillin would.

Condensed milk

This is whole milk that has been heavily sugared, and boiled down to a thick, slightly caramelized, sticky liquid. *Evaporated milk* (the same, but unsweetened; as used in coffee in the Netherlands) doesn't give as good results.

Butter

This **has** to be unsalted, of the highest quality, and no margarine can be substituted. This recipe is so high in calories that you'd be wasting your time trying to save any by spoiling the taste.

How to make vanilla sugar

Simple, but time-consuming: Bury a dried vanilla pod deep in a bag of sugar. After two weeks, fish the pod out. The vanilla sugar is ready; you should be able to smell the flavouring from outside the bag.

Vanilla pods, though expensive, can be reused many times. They are worth it for the subtle flavour they impart.

Equipment

- large pan, not non-stick
- big wooden spoon
- glass of cold water
- teaspoon
- plate, as spoon rest and tester for mixture colour.
- large shallow baking tray, carefully buttered.

Method



Damp the sugar with cold milk in the pan.

Add the butter and the condensed milk, and turn the heat on medium-high.

It's an idea to put a little dollop of the uncooked mix on the spoon rest plate. I find comparing the colours of the mixture as it cooks a better way of judging readiness than using a sugar thermometer.



Keep stirring evenly until the mixture comes

to the boil; this usually takes about ten minutes. If you start getting brownish streaks (caramel), turn the heat down a little, and keep up the stirring effort. If you get black streaks, you've burnt it. Good luck with cleaning the pan...



Once the mixture boils, turn the heat down low. Stir occasionally to stop the mix sticking. When it's simmering, the mix can be more than twice its original volume, so let's hope you've chosen a big enough pan.



You'll notice the mixture darken slightly; keep stirring now and then. It'll take about 20 minutes for the mix to cook.



Transfer a little of the hot mix to a teaspoon, and plunge it into cold water. It should form a soft, sticky ball that should drip off the spoon very slowly. When it does this, it's ready.

(I'd like to add that the goo on the spoon is very tasty, but be advised that it keeps its heat inside the glob. You can burn your tongue quite remarkably. Beware!)



Ready! I like my tablet a light colour, so it's usually done in twenty minutes or less (this took 18 from coming to the boil). If you prefer a stronger flavour, simmer for longer.

Now comes the difficult bit. Take the pan off the heat, and start stirring **vigorously**. Try to mix in some of the crystallized mixture that has formed on the side of the pan; what we're trying to do is to get the mixture to form large enough crystals that it will set, but small enough crystals that it will still pour. Once you feel the spoon stirring slightly grittily on the base of the pan, and the mixture being slightly stiffer, it's ready to pour.

The above is much harder to explain than to do; you'll know it when you feel the change. Of course, let it set too long or too fast, and you'll end up with a trayful of gritty lumps looking alarmingly similar to a cat box.



Quickly pour the mixture into the buttered baking tray, which should be on a heat-resistant surface. Scrape out as much of the mixture as you can, as it will set in the pan to concrete hardness, and someone will just have to eat what's left in there.



Here's the colour change, from uncooked mixture (cream coloured, in the middle -- almost the same colour as the plate) to the final colour, which is a golden fawn brown.



Don't be alarmed if you see little crazed patterns appearing on the surface as the tablet cools. It's just the sugar crystallizing.

Once the mixture has fully cooled and set (usually overnight, if you can keep your paws off it that long), slice into bars or small chunks, and give it to your friends. If they weren't your friends before you gave them tablet, they will be afterwards.

Notes on the recipe

- My dad, probably one of the greater connoisseurs of Great-Aunt Celie's tablet, takes issue with my use of vanilla. He says that she never used vanilla, and that's what makes it special. Feel free to miss out the vanilla if you want the authentic experience.
- Though I say not to use a non-stick pan to boil up the mixture, don't go out and buy a stainless pan just for this.
- I have no idea why MS Internet Explorer prints this page with such huge fonts. I'm quite happy with the way it appears on screen.
- A hint from my dad: *If you've dried your throat out by eating tablet, but still want to eat some more, eat a tangerine! It magically clears your throat, and sets you up to eat plenty more.*