

Love's Honeybun [Cheesecake]

The anticipation I had while waiting for the judge to announce the name of my assigned partner for the finale of the Valentine Baking Competition was almost overwhelming. Since it was a “couples” challenge with the last four contestants, I was looking around, hoping that I got someone who was actually into the competition, and not here taking up space.

When scanning, the final few there was one who caught my eye: Anthony, Anthony Burdain, owner of a small black-owned bakery in town that sells the best cheesecakes known to man. On top of that, he wasn't a terrible sight for sore eyes, with his caramel skin, dark hazelnut eyes, and smiles that could brighten the stars themselves. I genuinely hoped that I would be partnered up with him because, out of everyone left, I felt like he was a strong competitor I could team up with to finish this contest.

I spaced out when the judge started speaking but then I heard him say, “... and Crystal is going to work with Anthony.”

Afterward, I saw Anthony walking up to my counter, my heart pounding in my chest as he got closer. He held out his hand. “Anthony Burdain, nice to meet you,” he said as he happily smiled.

“Crystal Love, nice to meet you, as well,” I responded as I shook his hand.

“Alright contestants, remember the challenge is creating something that combines the both of you. I can't wait to see what you come up with!” The judge exclaimed. “Your time... starts... now!”

Anthony and I quickly huddled together, eager to brainstorm ideas that would perfectly blend our styles. The conversation was free-flowing, and we both felt a sense of connection, it felt warmly familiar.

"Now, this may be unexpected, but..." Anthony started, “how about a cheesecake with a twist?” he suggested, his eyes lighting up with enthusiasm.

I laughed at his sarcasm and nodded, excited by the idea. "I was thinking about trying to make a honeybun cake for this round. That said, maybe we can incorporate my recipe with your expertise to create a honeybun cheesecake, if that's okay with you," I responded, envisioning a dessert that would capture both our strengths and the spirit of the competition.

Anthony thought about my proposition for a moment. “A honeybun cheesecake...,” he said as his voice trailed off. Then, his eyes lit up with excitement, and a smile grew on his face. “That's not a bad idea,” he said, his voice brimming with enthusiasm, “Let's do it!”

As we laid out the ingredients before us, we saw the work ahead of us, the surmounting task of combining these different ingredients, representing two different sides of this pastry, to create something new. However, instead of feeling overwhelmed, we were fueled by the thrill of the challenge. Our shared passion for baking and the desire to impress the judge ignited a fire within us, pushing us to work seamlessly together, hoping to make it work.

We each took turns adding each individual ingredient to the bowl. Anthony first added the cream cheese, knowing it was the cornerstone of any great cheesecake; its rich, smooth

texture would provide the perfect foundation, ensuring that our dessert would be both creamy and delicious. We then added all four eggs in, making sure no eggshells were in the mix that would cause disharmony in the dessert overall. Afterward, we fired up the mixture on low-medium speed, as this would help to incorporate the ingredients gently without overmixing, ensuring a consistent batter.

After that, it was my turn to add the ingredients sugar and vanilla extract. My eye caught Anthony, making a crumb crust of brown sugar, butter, and all-purpose flour, serving as the base supporting each slice and ensuring its stability. With every whisk, stir, and sprinkle, our confidence grew, determined to finish our creation to perfection. The energy was electrifying.

Finally, with time left, we put everything in the spring pan, the harmonious mixture gracefully landing on the crumb crust. I also added a mixture of brown sugar and cinnamon on top of the cheesecake to create a sweet and spice balance that warms the soul.

After putting that final touch, I put the cheesecake in the oven, so the pastry can firm and its distinct texture could form. Afterward, Anthony put the cheesecake in the fridge to chill, ensuring the texture would be smooth when serving. Finally, with little time left, to my surprise, Anthony made a caramel sauce to drizzle on the cheesecake.

“The caramel will give a strong first impression,” Anthony happily said.

“That’s a great idea!” I said complimentary. Anthony gave a sweet smile in response.

And just like that, we finished the task in no time. We both seemed to have a natural rhythm that allowed us to work together with ease. That synchronized rhythm culminated into the smell of warm brown sugar, cinnamon, and caramel filling the air, and we knew we had created something truly special. During this whole task, I felt a form of synergy grow between us, like we understood each other and were already on the same page, and I hoped this wouldn’t be our last recipe together.

Then, it was time to be judged; the judge returned and taste-tested our honeybun cheesecake and our opponents’ dish. Finally, he gave his results:

“And, the winners are,” the judge exclaimed.

I closed my eyes, hoping that our cheesecake won the competition. The next thing I knew, I heard a voice.

“Ms. Burdain,” The gentle voice said. “Ms. Burdain?” the voice repeated.

I slowly opened my eyes and saw Anthony crouched down in front of me, the sun gleaming through the window behind him, I then smiled at him.

“There you are. Now, how’s my beautiful wife doing this morning?” He asked, smiling.

“I’m doing better, now that I’ve seen you,” I reply while stretching my arms.

Anthony chuckled. “I saw that you went to sleep on the Soulmate Bakes Competition on TV last night. “

"Yeah, I couldn't help it," I said with a sheepish grin.

Anthony shook his head and laughed. "It's ok, I'm sure you needed the rest. Did you have a good sleep?"

I nodded, recalling the vivid dream. "It felt so real," I began. "We were in this intense baking competition, creating a honeybun cheesecake together. Every detail was perfect, from my brown sugar to your amazing caramel drizzle. It was as if we were in perfect harmony, anticipating each other's moves, and I really thought we had a winning dish."

"Well, you know I'll always want some of your brown sugar," he softly said, causing me to blush. He seemed amused and curious about the dream, his eyes sparkling with interest. "So, did we win?" he teased, leaning in closer.

I laughed, shaking my head. "Just as the judge was about to announce the winner, I woke up!" I confessed with a playful sigh. "I guess we'll never know if our honeybun cheesecake took the prize."

Anthony grinned, rubbing his hand on my shoulder. "Well, in my book, we're always winners," he said reassuringly.

"Same here," I said smiling, happily staring into his eyes.

"I love you," he said, his voice full of emotion.

"I love you too," I responded, understanding what he meant, like he was speaking to my soul.

Anthony leaned in and kissed me softly, before pulling away, leaving me blushing; he softly smiled, then stood up and walked to the door.

"Plus," he started, "maybe tonight, we'll dream up a rematch and finally find out," he playfully suggested. "Until then, I'll just have to fall back on my optimistic imagination." He winked and left the room, leaving me with a silly grin on my face.

I laughed, recounting the vivid details of our cheesecake adventure, feeling grateful to have him by my side both in dreams and reality. Whether we won the dream competition or not, he'll always be my honeybun, and that's always sweet enough.