

Cutting the sugar? Up the zest so you won't notice

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When it comes to sweets, I have a surprising trick up my sleeve. And the best part about it? It probably won't cost you a penny because most likely you already have it, but throw it in the trash.

I'm talking about orange zest, the thin outer skin of an orange. I don't mean the white part, called the pith. That's bitter. The zest is just the paper-thin layer of colored skin, which has tons of fragrant and flavorful oils. Those oils are perfect for tricking us into thinking something is sweeter than it really is. I use zest in cakes, muffins and cookie doughs, and to bring out the sweetness in root vegetables, such as roasted beets or carrot soup.

It's easy to build a stock of this ingredient. Any time you grab an orange for a snack, take an extra minute to run a wand-style grater or vegetable peeler gently over the peel, being careful not to extract any of the pith. The zest can be saved either by freezing it in a small container or by drying.

To dry zest, place it in a 200 F oven, turn off the heat and let it sit undisturbed until the zest is dry, about 30 to 60 minutes. Let cool completely, then place the dried zest in a clean spice jar. Very quickly you'll have a supply of flavor ready to go in either your pantry or freezer. Note that you may need to chop up larger pieces, and the zest will lose some potency as it ages, so just add a smidge extra when following recipes that call for fresh zest.

I'm sharing a seasonal favorite in our house - orange zest pudding with shaved dark chocolate. I use low-fat milk to make the pudding, but add an egg yolk at the end to impart just enough richness to make the pudding feel custardy and decadent. I like it because it's not overly sweet and it features one of my favorite food combinations - orange and chocolate.

But my kids like love it for another reason: the creamy orange color topped with dark chocolate looks Halloween-themed.

ORANGE ZEST PUDDING WITH SHAVED DARK CHOCOLATE

The best tool for zesting citrus is a fine wand-style grater. These very sharp graters are easy to use and do an excellent job of removing the flavorful zest without getting the bitter white pith beneath it.

Start to finish: 20 minutes, plus cooling Servings: 4

- 1 3/4 cups low-fat or reduced-fat milk
- 2 1/2 tablespoons cornstarch
- 1/4 cup light brown sugar
- Zest and juice of 1 large orange
- 1 egg yolk, lightly beaten
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt
- 2 ounces dark or bittersweet chocolate, shaved using vegetable peeler or wand-style grater



In a large saucepan over medium heat, whisk together the milk and cornstarch until dissolved. Add the brown sugar and continue to whisk while bringing the mixture to a gentle simmer. Cook, whisking constantly, until the milk thickens to a thick pudding, about 2 minutes.

Whisk in the orange zest and juice, then remove the pan from the heat.

Place the egg yolk in a small bowl. One at a time, while whisking, add a few tablespoons of the hot pudding to the egg. Transfer the egg-pudding mixture to the saucepan with the remaining pudding.

Return the pudding to low heat and cook, whisking constantly, until it just begins to bubble. Remove from the heat, whisk in the vanilla extract and salt, then divide between 4 parfait glasses. Chill for at least 1 hour. Just before serving, top each cup with shaved chocolate.

Nutrition information per serving: 220 calories; 80 calories from fat (36 percent of total calories); 8 g fat (4 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 60 mg cholesterol; 34 g carbohydrate; 1 g fiber; 26 g sugar; 6 g protein; 95 mg sodium.