SOFTWARE & TECH

How To Make Caramel From Condensed Milk

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Introduction: The Magic of Condensed Milk Caramel

If you have ever craved a rich, buttery caramel sauce but felt intimidated by the precise temperatures and constant stirring required in traditional recipes, there is a simpler, almost magical method waiting for you: making caramel from sweetened condensed milk. This technique transforms a humble can of condensed milk into a luscious, golden caramel (often called **dulce de leche**) with minimal effort and ingredients. Whether you want to drizzle it over ice cream, fill crepes, spread on toast, or use as a layer in cakes, learning **how to make caramel from condensed milk** is a game-changer for any home cook.

The beauty of this method lies in its simplicity. Sweetened condensed milk is essentially milk that has been concentrated and sweetened, which, when heated, undergoes the Maillard reaction—a chemical process that creates deep caramelized flavors and a thick, spoonable texture. You do not need to babysit a pot of sugar or worry about crystallization. With a few different techniques—on the stovetop, in the oven, in a slow cooker, or even in a pressure cooker—you can achieve perfect results every time. In this comprehensive guide, we will walk through each method, share safety tips, and answer common questions so you can become a condensed milk caramel expert.

What Is Condensed Milk Caramel?

Condensed milk caramel is often referred to as **dulce de leche**, which means “milk candy” in Spanish. It is a popular confection in Latin America, where it is made by slowly heating sweetened milk until it caramelizes. The homemade version using canned condensed milk is beloved for its convenience and consistent results. The final product is smooth, thick, and deeply sweet with notes of vanilla and toffee. It can be used as a topping, filling, or dip, and its versatility makes it a staple in many kitchens.

Why Make Caramel from Condensed Milk?

- Fewer ingredients: You only need one main ingredient: sweetened condensed milk. Optional add-ins like vanilla extract or sea salt can enhance the flavor.
- No candy thermometer required: Unlike classic caramel, you don’t need to monitor exact temperatures.
- Hands-off methods: Most techniques involve simply applying heat and waiting.
- Consistency: The result is always creamy and foolproof when done correctly.
- Long shelf life: Sealed properly, homemade condensed milk caramel can last weeks in the refrigerator.

Essential Ingredients and Tools

Ingredients

- 1 can (14 oz / 397 g) sweetened condensed milk
- Optional: 1 teaspoon vanilla extract, a pinch of sea salt, or a pat of butter for extra richness

Tools for Different Methods

- For stovetop: A large pot, water, and the unopened can (or a jar).
- For oven: A baking dish, aluminum foil, and a larger pan for a water bath.
- For slow cooker: A slow cooker and a trivet or cloth to keep the can off the bottom.
- For pressure cooker/Instant Pot: A pressure cooker with a rack.
- General: Oven mitts, tongs, a can opener, and an airtight container for storage.

Method 1: Stovetop Method (Classic & Quickest)

The stovetop method is the most traditional way to learn **how to make caramel from condensed milk**. It can be done with the can fully submerged in water or by transferring the milk to a jar. The key is maintaining a gentle simmer to prevent the can from exploding.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Remove the label from the can of sweetened condensed milk. Make sure the can has no dents or damages.
2. Place the can on its side in a large, deep pot. You must use a pot large enough to keep the can fully covered with water at all times.
3. Fill the pot with water until the can is submerged by at least 2 inches (5 cm).
4. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, then reduce to a gentle simmer. Do not let the water boil vigorously, as this can cause the can to burst.
5. Simmer for 2 to 3 hours. For a lighter, pourable caramel, cook for 2 hours. For a thick, spreadable dulce de leche, cook for 3 hours.
6. Monitor the water level every 30 minutes. Add more boiling water as needed to keep the can fully submerged.
7. Turn off the heat and let the can cool completely in the water. This is crucial—do not try to open a hot can, as the caramel could erupt.
8. Once cool, remove the can, open it, and stir the caramel. If desired, mix in vanilla or salt.

Safety Note

Never let the water boil dry. If the can is not fully submerged, it can overheat and explode, causing serious injury. Always use a pot with high sides and check frequently.

Method 2: Oven-Baked Dulce de Leche

This method is perfect if you want a hands-off approach with a controlled temperature. Baking condensed milk caramel in a water bath produces a silky, even caramel without any risk of the can bursting.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Preheat your oven to 425°F (220°C).
2. Pour the sweetened condensed milk into a 9-inch (23 cm) pie dish or a small baking dish. Cover tightly with aluminum foil.
3. Place the dish inside a larger roasting pan. Pour hot water into the roasting pan so it reaches halfway up the sides of the dish.
4. Bake for 1.5 to 2 hours, checking halfway. Add more hot water if the water bath evaporates.
5. Remove the foil carefully. The caramel should be thick and golden brown. Whisk until smooth.
6. Let cool slightly; it will thicken as it cools. Store in a jar in the refrigerator.

Tips for Oven Method

- Use a shallow dish for faster, more even cooking.
- Stir halfway through for a consistent color.
- For a darker, more intense flavor, bake a little longer, but watch closely to avoid burning.

Method 3: Slow Cooker Method (Set and Forget)

If you own a slow cooker, you can make condensed milk caramel while you go about your day. The low, steady heat prevents any risk of scorching.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Place the sealed can of sweetened condensed milk in the slow cooker. Alternatively, pour the milk into a mason jar and seal it tightly (choose heat-safe jars).
2. Fill the slow cooker with water until the can (or jar) is fully covered.
3. Cook on low for 8 to 10 hours. Do not use the high setting.
4. Turn off the slow cooker and let the can cool completely in the water.
5. Open and stir. The caramel will be very dark and thick if cooked for 10 hours; for a lighter caramel, aim for 7–8 hours.

Why This Method Works

The slow cooker maintains a constant temperature just below boiling, which slowly concentrates and caramelizes the milk sugars. It is the most hands-off technique and yields a traditional dulce de leche taste.

Method 4: Instant Pot or Pressure Cooker (Fastest)

For those who want the deepest flavor in a fraction of the time, the pressure cooker is ideal. It mimics the stovetop method but uses pressure to reduce cooking time dramatically.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Place a sealed can of sweetened condensed milk on the trivet inside the Instant Pot.
2. Add water until the can is almost covered (usually 2–3 cups).
3. Close the lid and set the valve to sealing. Cook on high pressure for 40–45 minutes.
4. Allow natural pressure release for 15–20 minutes, then manually release any remaining pressure.
5. Carefully remove the can with tongs. Let it cool completely before opening.

Advantages of Pressure Cooker Method

- Cook time is only 40 minutes (plus cooling).
- Color and flavor are consistent.
- Less water evaporation than stovetop.

Flavor Variations and Uses

Once you master **how to make caramel from condensed milk**, you can customize it to suit your sweet tooth. Here are some popular ideas:

Additions

- Vanilla extract: Stir 1 teaspoon after cooking for classic warmth.
- Sea salt: Sprinkle flaky sea salt for a salted caramel twist.
- Cinnamon or espresso powder: Add 1/2 teaspoon for depth.
- Butter: Whisk in 1 tablespoon unsalted butter for extra creaminess.

Ways to Use Condensed Milk Caramel

- Drizzle over pancakes, waffles, or french toast.
- Layer in parfaits with yogurt and granola.

- Fill macarons, cakes, or thumbprint cookies.
- Stir into coffee or milkshakes.
- Spread on toast or crackers (try with cream cheese).
- Use as a dip for apple slices or pretzels.

Frequently Asked Questions

Can I use light or fat-free condensed milk?

Yes, but the resulting caramel will be thinner and less rich. Full-fat sweetened condensed milk produces the best texture.

Why did my caramel turn out grainy?

Graininess can occur if the milk was heated too quickly or if it curdled. Always use gentle, even heat. If using the oven or slow cooker, make sure the water bath surrounds the dish evenly.

How do I store caramel made from condensed milk?

Transfer it to a clean, airtight jar or container. Refrigerate for up to 3 weeks. You can also freeze it for up to 3 months. Thaw in the refrigerator and stir well before use.

Can I open the can while it’s still warm?

No! The caramel inside is under pressure and extremely hot. Always let the can cool completely in the water before opening to avoid burns and mess.

Troubleshooting Common Issues

Problem	Cause	Solution

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