



SOUR CREAM SOUFFLÉ

BY ALEX HITZ

IF PUNDITS ARE CORRECT—that New York changes every seven years—the New York I moved to 20+ years ago is nearly 400+ percent different now than it was then. It seems to me 4,000,000 percent. You can quote me.

In those days, in the social swirl, there were hosts and hostesses who actually entertained their guests at home. Some of them actually cooked, while others caused it to be done, but both cared about every bite. These hosts and hostesses were, more often than not, famous or celebrated in their respective fields, storied characters, wits, style-setters, op-ed personalities, and larger-than-life legends—each one unafraid to be bold. That’s also a different New York. And it’s impossible to speak of a group like that without dropping a name, so here it is: Bill Blass.

Blass—as close friends called him—was a self-styled aesthete. He was handsome, generous, and rugged, yet refined. Though from humble beginnings in Indiana, he studied and educated himself to become a *grand seigneur* by the highest European standards, all the while remaining proudly American. He loved art, objects, houses, gardens, and food. And smoking and gossip. The clothes he designed were classic and did not succumb to trends, and, in turn, Blass was often criticized by the fashion press for designing “wearable” clothes. Imagine that.

Those “wearable” clothes, and Blass himself, for more than 40 years, commandeered unfettered loyalty from no fewer than zillions of American upper-class ladies who wanted a quality, cosmopolitan, New York look to wear to their luncheons in St. Louis, their garden parties in Atlanta, their seated dinners in Dallas. My grandmother, mother, and aunt were among them. The clothes aside, Blass’s licenses for fragrances, leather goods, underwear, Lincoln Town Cars, you-name-it, were big business—an empire even by today’s standards. Blass was a fitting Emperor.

His houses were stars in their own right—an apartment at One Sutton Place South done with Chessy Rayner and Mica Ertegun featured maybe the most sumptuous but masculine neoclassical urban interior that existed in America, and his country house in Connecticut, an 18th-century tavern, though a bit more relaxed, was singular in its uncompromising quality, its pride of place. If other designers imitated a style, Blass unapologetically invented his own.



This page, from above: Bill Blass—or “Blass” to his friends—was a force of 20th-century American fashion as well as a formidable host, inspiring Alex’s Sour Cream Soufflé recipe (opposite page); the actress and author

Brooke Hayward, who introduced Alex to Blass in the mid-1990s.

Sour Cream Soufflé

SOUR CREAM SOUFFLÉ

Yield: One eight-cup soufflé dish, or two four-cup soufflé dishes, 6–8 servings

- 1 cup plus 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese divided, firmly packed
- 4 tablespoons salted butter
- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon minced shallots
- 5 egg yolks
- 1 ½ cups sour cream
- 1 ½ teaspoons salt plus a pinch
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 2 tablespoons chopped chives
- 7 large egg whites
- ½ teaspoon ground black pepper

Preparation:

- Pre-heat the oven to 400°F. Butter a six-cup soufflé dish, or two four-cup soufflé dishes. The smaller the dish, the higher the soufflé will rise. Add 2 tablespoons of Parmesan cheese and shake the buttered dishes to coat them with the Parmesan.
- In a heavy skillet over a medium heat, melt the butter, and when the foaming has subsided, add the shallots. Sauté them for approximately 3 minutes until they are soft, and then add the flour to make a roux. Stir it with a wooden spoon or a rubber spatula until it is fully cooked through but not brown. This will take another 3–4 minutes.
- Let the mixture cool approximately 5–10 minutes. In a small mixing bowl, briefly whisk the egg yolks until they liquefy.
- In a large mixing bowl, combine the roux, the remaining 1 cup of Parmesan cheese, the sour cream, 1 ½ teaspoons of the salt, the cayenne pepper, chives, and black pepper. Stir in the egg yolks.
- In the bowl of a large electric stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, beat the egg whites with the remaining pinch of salt until they stand in soft peaks. Add 1/3 of the whipped egg whites to the mixing bowl and stir it well to lighten the mixture. Fold in the remaining egg whites.
- Reduce the oven temperature to 350°F.
- Pour the soufflé mixture gently into the prepared soufflé dish so as not to deflate the egg whites, and bake it for 25–30 minutes. Serve it immediately.



Brooke Hayward, author of the 1977 blockbuster *Haywire*, which is, to me, the finest book ever written about dysfunctional families—her own—called me one morning in the mid 1990s after I'd lived in New York for about three months.

“Good morning, darling,” her voice lilted. “Blass wants to meet you.”

“Really? Why?” I answered, knowing him only by reputation, and wondering what on earth I could tell Blass that he didn't already know.

“Because I told him about you, that's why,” explained Brooke. “So now, darling, you and I are going to see him. Come to Connecticut this Saturday and we'll go there for lunch. Love.” Brooke hung up.

It was February. A completely hateful, hideous day—the meteorologists called it a “wintry mix.” I called it sludge. I put on a green cashmere turtleneck, blue jeans, and a duffel coat and drove to New Preston to meet Brooke—and Blass. I knew he was sick with cancer.

We were greeted at the door by his major-domo, “Big Al,” and golden retrievers, Shelby and Barnaby, and ushered into the library. “Hello, kid,” Blass greeted me from his chair by the roaring fire, weak from his recent chemo treatment, but smiling, warm, and welcoming. “Why, hello, Blass,” I replied, that name ceremoniously reserved for intimates.

Everybody laughed. For the next six or seven hours we gossiped and chatted and laughed and drank—and ate the most delicious smoked salmon, Sour Cream Soufflé, and vanilla ice cream. Shelby and Barnaby got the ice cream, too. It was a treasured lunch on a treasured day to herald the start of a cozy and pleasant friendship for the next very few years before Blass died from cancer.

Although he was famous for his meatloaf, the recipe here is my favorite of the dishes in his repertoire. Sadly, I had to recreate it on my own as I never got the formula from him, but I'm proud of it. I think Blass would have liked this version, and relished in its “virtuousness.” As he told me, he served Sour Cream Soufflé instead of Cheese Soufflé to his friends and the ladies he dressed so they wouldn't get fat—because, according to Blass, it only has *half* the calories of a soufflé made with pure cheese. You decide. ♦