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Un-beet-able Dessert

These vibrant cupcakes don't need artificial dyes to give them their red hue. The secret ingredient here is beet, which adds the perfect coloring and packs fiber, manganese and iron. Beets are also full of folate, a B vitamin that is essential for producing and repairing DNA and may play a role in cancer protection.

Red Velvet Cupcakes

1 cup canned beets, drained (see note)
1/2 cup reduced-fat buttermilk, divided
1/2 tsp. white vinegar
1/2 tsp. vanilla extract
3/4 cup plus 2 Tbsp. unbleached all-purpose flour
6 Tbsp. unsweetened natural cocoa, plus 1-2 tablespoons for decorating
1/2 tsp. baking powder
1/2 tsp. baking soda
1/2 tsp. ground cinnamon
1/2 tsp. salt, preferably kosher
1/3 cup canola oil, chilled
3/4 cup sugar
1 large egg, cold

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Drop paper liners into cavities of a 12-cavity regular size muffin pan.

Working a knife up and down in a measuring cup, coarsely chop beets. Place beets in blender, add 1/4 cup buttermilk and whirl until beets are finely chopped. Add remaining buttermilk, vinegar and vanilla and whirl to a puree, making sure no lumps of beet remain. Set beet mixture aside.

In small bowl, combine flour, 6 tablespoons of cocoa, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon and salt, and set aside.

In medium bowl, combine cold oil and sugar. With hand mixer on medium speed, mix until sugar is evenly moistened. Add cold egg and beat at high speed until mixture resembles mayonnaise and sugar is almost completely dissolved, 90 seconds. Add beet mixture and beat until combined. Sift dry ingredients into bowl and mix, either on low speed or by hand until combined with wet ingredients. Divide batter evenly among lined muffin cups, filling them about two-thirds full.

Bake cupcakes for 28-30 minutes, or until tops feel springy and when one cupcake is lifted out, bottom feels springy, too. Immediately transfer cupcakes to wire rack and cool completely before frosting. Cupcakes are best when stored overnight at room temperature in covered container.

Ice cupcakes, using about 1 tablespoon of frosting for each. Place remaining cocoa in a strainer and sprinkle it over frosted cupcakes. If desired, let cupcakes sit at room temperature to let frosting set, about 2 hours. The frosted cupcakes can sit at room temperature for up to 12 hours.

Makes 12 cupcakes.

Note: Use either sliced or whole beets, whichever costs less. An 8 1/4-ounce can yields slightly more than 1 cup. Look to be sure there is no sugar added and make sure not to grab pickled beets.

Cream Cheese Frosting

2/3 cup confectioners sugar

4 Tbsp. reduced-fat cream cheese

1/2-1 tsp. vanilla extract

In small bowl, work sugar and cream cheese together with wooden spoon or hand mixer until combined. Mix in vanilla.

This frosting is best when refrigerated 8 hours to overnight, loosely covered, before using. It keeps in refrigerator for 5 days.

Makes a generous 2/3 cup.

Per serving (plain cupcake): 159 cal; 7 g fat, 1 g sat fat, 198 mg sodium, 23 CHO, 1.5 g fiber, 3 g protein

Per serving (frosting): 34 cal; 1 g fat, <1 g sat fat, 15 mg sodium, 6 CHO, 0 g fiber, 0 g protein