

— AMERICA'S —
TEST KITCHEN

Spicy Caramel Popcorn

SERVES Makes about 3½ quarts

TIME 45 minutes

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS

Caramel strikes fear even in experienced cooks. Why? It's notorious for burning, turning gritty, or simply cooking unevenly. We worked through every variable and question we had to come up with an easy method that anyone can master. The highlights: We cook the sugar with water and corn syrup, which helps the sugar dissolve and melt evenly and prevents crystallization, respectively. We use two heat levels, starting the sugar mixture over medium-high heat so that it melts quickly and then reducing the heat to low to provide a wider window for nailing the temperature. And we use two basic but key pieces of equipment: a heavy saucepan, which cooks the sugar evenly, and an instant-read thermometer, which is the fastest and most reliable way to assess the caramel's doneness. Once the caramel reaches between 365 and 375 degrees, we add butter, salt, cayenne, and baking soda, an alkaline ingredient that reacts with the acidic caramel. The reaction causes the caramel to increase in volume, making it easier to evenly coat the popcorn, and it creates tiny air bubbles that make the coating crisp and delicate —not hard—when it sets.



INGREDIENTS

BEFORE YOU BEGIN



- 10 cups popped popcorn
- 1 ¼ cups granulated sugar
- ½ cup water
- ⅓ cup light corn syrup
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ⅛ to ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- ⅔ cup smoked almonds, chopped coarse



If using salted popcorn, decrease the salt to ¼ teaspoon. For spicier popcorn, use the greater amount of cayenne pepper. Salted roasted almonds can be used in place of the smoked almonds, if desired.

INSTRUCTIONS

1 Lightly spray large bowl and rimmed baking sheet with vegetable oil spray. Place popcorn in prepared bowl. Bring sugar, water, and corn syrup to boil in medium heavy-bottomed saucepan over medium-high heat. Cook, without stirring, until mixture is straw-colored, 6 to 8 minutes. Reduce heat to medium-low and continue to cook, swirling saucepan occasionally, until mixture is dark amber and registers between 365 and 375 degrees, 2 to 5 minutes longer.

2 Off heat, quickly but carefully add butter, salt, and cayenne; stir until fully combined (mixture will bubble and steam). Return saucepan to low heat, stir in baking soda, and cook, stirring constantly, until mixture is uniform in color. Pour caramel over popcorn and, working quickly, stir until well coated. (Use towel or oven mitt to hold bowl, and avoid touching hot caramel.) Stir in almonds. Transfer mixture to prepared sheet and spread into even layer. Let cool for 15 minutes. Break cooled popcorn into pieces of desired size. (Popcorn can be stored in airtight container at room temperature for up to 5 days.)