preserved lemon poppy seed cheesecake

active time: 20 minutes
total time: 16 hours

graham cracker crust

- 12 full graham crackers (180g, 2 cups)
- 5 tablespoons butter, melted (71 g)
- 2 tablespoons sugar (30g)
- 1/4 teaspoon salt (1g)

1. Preheat the oven to 350° F convection (177° C).
2. Finely grind the graham crackers in a food processor.
3. Add the melted butter, sugar, and salt, and process until everything is well-blended.
4. Lightly coat the sides of an 8 or 9-inch cheesecake round with oil or butter.
5. Place the crumbly crust in the cheesecake round, and press it down into 1 even layer. Use a glass, measuring cup, or something else that has a flat bottom to press it compactly.
6. Place the cheesecake round on a rimmed baking sheet and bake for 10 to 12 minutes, until it turns a little golden. Let it cool while you work on the filling.

filling

- 1 1/2 pounds full-fat labneh (680g)*
- 2 egg yolks (40g)
- 3 large eggs (150g)
- 1 cup sugar (200g)
- 1/4 cup minced preserved lemon rind (35g)**
- 2 tablespoons poppy seeds (20g)
- 1/2 teaspoon salt, or to taste (2.5g)

1. Lower the oven to 300° F convection.***
2. Place the labneh in a medium mixing bowl. Add the egg yolks and slowly whisk together to completely incorporate (use a whisk, but do not whip it together—you don’t want to incorporate too much air into the filling).
3. Add the remaining eggs one egg at a time, mixing everything together completely with each addition.
4. Add the sugar and stir together until it all dissolves completely. Then stir in the preserved lemon rind and poppy seeds, and season with the salt (unless your lemons are super salty—see the note below).
5. Pour into the (slightly cooled) crust and bake for about 55 minutes, just until the very center is a little jiggly. Don’t worry if it cracks a bit (it’ll get covered).

topping

- 1/2 pound full-fat labneh (227g)
- 2 tablespoons sugar (30g)
- a little extra labneh or Greek yogurt for touch-ups (reserve about 1 tablespoon)
- more preserved lemon rind and poppy seeds for decoration

1. Once the cheesecake comes out of the oven, let it sit while you make the topping.
2. Combine the labneh and sugar, and pour over the top. Carefully smooth it out, put it back in the oven for 10 more minutes. Remove from the oven, run a knife around the sides, and leave it at room temperature for about 2 hours before covering and refrigerating overnight. If you don’t have all night, refrigerate it for at least 3 to 4 hours. Don’t worry if the edges are a little rough—you will fix it later.
3. Once it’s chilled long enough, you can touch up the edges before removing from the pan.**** Simply add a tiny dab of labneh or Greek yogurt to any rough spots around the edges, and smooth it out a little with the back of a spoon. Wash your hands very well or wear gloves, wet your finger, and smooth out the dabs of labneh. Without running a knife around again, remove from the pan, place on a serving plate, and sprinkle with poppy seeds and sliced preserved lemons (don’t go too crazy with the preserved lemon decorations—they’re extremely flavorful, and you mostly just want them for decoration).

* I developed this recipe with store-bought labneh, but you can use homemade. Just be sure to strain it long enough (the full 12 hours, or longer) or the cheesecake might not set correctly. If you buy store-bought labneh, make sure it’s really good quality. It needs to be very thick and sour.
** See the notes above the recipe for where to find preserved lemon, and make sure there’s no garlic or savory spices in the brine (a little hot pepper’s just fine though). Commercially processed preserved lemons tend to have much less sodium than home preserved lemons, and brands vary. If you have particularly salty lemons, proceed with caution, and add them to taste instead of just adding the entire 1/4 cup. Don’t add the extra 1/2 teaspoon of salt until you’re sure your lemons aren’t too salty. This amount worked perfectly with the brand I chose, but you should use your judgment.
*** If you don’t have a convection oven, it will just take a little longer to bake all the way through. When I’ve used a conventional oven for this recipe, it’s taken about 15 to 20 minutes longer to bake through.
**** I feel like food stylists usually don’t tell you their secrets to getting a picture-perfect result, so I included my trick to getting clean edges on a cheesecake. Whenever I make cheesecake, the very top edges get all messed up when I run a knife around the sides. I’ve never found a way to avoid this. I think using parchment paper would prevent the problem, but I don’t like the crinkly look that gives the sides. But this is a super easy way to fix the problem, and it works like a charm. You can of course just serve it as is and not worry about it, but if you’re really going for it on Instagram, make sure you reserve an extra tablespoon or so of labneh for touch-ups.