

# Gluten-Free Caramel Cookie Bars

## Ingredients

Unsalted butter . . . . .	1½ cups (3 sticks)	Brown sugar, packed . . . . .	1 cup
Powdered sugar . . . . .	½ cup	Sweetened condensed milk .	1 can (14 oz.)
BRM 1:1 G.F. flour . . . . .	2 cups	Light corn syrup . . . . .	¼ cup
Fine salt . . . . .	½ tsp.	Semisweet chocolate, chopped . . .	12 oz.
Mexican vanilla . . . . .	2 tsp.	Hazelnuts or Pecans . . . . .	¾ cup

## Directions

Preheat oven to  $350^{\circ}\text{F}$  — Line a  $9\times 13$ -inch pan with parchment, leaving overhang on two long sides — Bring **butter** for shortbread to cool room temperature — Measure and combine **brown sugar**, **sweetened condensed milk**, **corn syrup**, and ¼ tsp. **salt** in *Medium Bowl #1* (caramel ingredients) — Chop **semisweet chocolate**: place 9 oz. in *Medium Bowl #2* (to melt) and 3 oz. in *Small Bowl #1* (seed for tempering) —

### 1. Prepare nuts:

- (a) Toast **nuts** at  $350^{\circ}\text{F}$  until fragrant and golden: *10–12 minutes* for hazelnuts (rub off skins in a towel if desired) or *8–10 minutes* for pecans
- (b) Coarsely chop and place in *Small Bowl #2*

### 2. Make the shortbread base in a medium bowl:

- (a) Add 1 cup **butter**, ½ cup **powdered sugar**, and 1 tsp. **vanilla**. Beat with a hand mixer on medium until smooth and fluffy, about *2 minutes*. Scrape bowl as needed.
- (b) Add 2 cups **GF flour** and ¼ tsp. **salt**; mix on low until no dry flour remains and dough holds together when pressed.
- (c) Press dough evenly into the prepared pan in a uniform layer. Dock all over with a fork.

### 3. Bake at $350^{\circ}\text{F}$ for *18–22 minutes* until shortbread is set and golden at the edges: center is light golden and dry to the touch, and the surface feels firm when gently pressed. Cool in pan on a rack until completely cool to the touch, about *45 minutes*. The base must be fully cool before adding caramel or it will melt and slide.

### 4. Make the caramel in a heavy 3–4 qt. saucepan:

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- (a) Combine  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup **butter** and the contents of *Medium Bowl #1* (**brown sugar, sweetened condensed milk, corn syrup,  $\frac{1}{4}$  tsp. salt**). Clip a candy thermometer to the side so the tip is immersed and not touching the bottom.
  - (b) Cook over *medium heat*, stirring constantly with a heat-safe spatula and scraping the bottom and sides to prevent scorching. The mixture will bubble and thicken; cook until the thermometer reads  $235\text{--}240^{\circ}\text{F}$  (soft-ball stage), about *12–18 minutes*. At this temperature the caramel will set into a chewy (not runny or hard) layer.
  - (c) Optional cold-water test: drop a small bit into a cup of cold water; it should form a soft, pliable ball that flattens when removed. If still below  $235^{\circ}\text{F}$ , continue cooking in *1 minute* increments. If you have passed  $240^{\circ}\text{F}$ , use as is but expect a firmer chew.
5. Remove the caramel from heat and stir in remaining *1 tsp. vanilla*. Fold in the **nuts** (*Small Bowl #2*). Pour immediately over the cooled shortbread and spread evenly to the edges with a heat-safe spatula.
6. Cool the caramel at room temperature until it is no longer warm and feels set when gently touched, about *1–2 hours*, or refrigerate for *45–60 minutes* until firm. The caramel layer must be set before adding chocolate.
7. Melt **chocolate** (*Medium Bowl #2, 9 oz.*) in a double boiler over barely simmering water, or in a microwave in *20–30 second* bursts, stirring after each, until smooth and no lumps remain. Do not exceed  $120^{\circ}\text{F}$ ; if using a thermometer, remove from heat when melted and around  $115\text{--}118^{\circ}\text{F}$ .
8. Add the reserved **chocolate** (*Small Bowl #1, 3 oz.*) to the melted chocolate in two or three additions, stirring constantly after each until fully melted. Continue stirring until the mixture cools to  $88\text{--}90^{\circ}\text{F}$  on a candy or instant-read thermometer, about *5–10 minutes*. The chocolate is in temper when it reaches this range and looks smooth and glossy. To test: spread a thin layer on a cool plate or the back of a spoon and refrigerate for *2–3 minutes*; it should set shiny and firm with a crisp snap when broken.
9. Working quickly, pour the tempered **chocolate** over the cooled caramel layer and spread evenly to the edges with an offset spatula. The chocolate will set with a glossy finish and clean snap when in temper. If it thickens or loses shine before you finish, it has gone out of temper; you can still use it—the bars will taste the same but the coating may look dull or feel slightly soft. Refrigerate until the chocolate is fully set, about *30–45 minutes*.
10. Use the parchment overhang to lift the slab onto a cutting board. Run a sharp knife under hot water, wipe dry, and cut into 24 bars (6 columns  $\times$  4 rows). Wipe the blade clean between cuts for neat edges. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator.

## Equipment Required

- 9×13-inch baking pan
- Parchment paper
- Candy thermometer (clip-on) or instant-read thermometer
- Heavy 3–4 qt. saucepan (for caramel; large size prevents boil-over when adding ingredients)
- Double boiler or heatproof bowl plus saucepan (for chocolate), or microwave-safe bowl
- Medium bowls (2), Small bowls (2)
- Hand mixer
- Heat-safe spatula, offset spatula
- Cutting board and sharp knife
- Measuring cups and spoons

## Hints and Notes

### Yield

- Makes 24 small bars (6×4 grid from 9×13 pan)

### Mise en Place

- *Medium Bowl #1* — caramel wet mix: 1 cup packed **brown sugar**, 1 can **sweetened condensed milk**,  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup **corn syrup**,  $\frac{1}{4}$  tsp. **salt**
- *Medium Bowl #2* — 9 oz. chopped **semisweet chocolate** (to melt)
- *Small Bowl #1* — 3 oz. chopped **semisweet chocolate** (seed for tempering)
- *Small Bowl #2* —  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup toasted, coarsely chopped **nuts**
- Bring 1 cup **butter** (for shortbread) to cool room temperature; have  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup **butter** (for caramel) ready
- Line pan and preheat oven before starting shortbread

### Ingredient Tips

- **1:1 GF flour** (e.g. Bob's Red Mill) gives a tender shortbread; do not use a bread-style GF blend

- **Sweetened condensed milk** is not interchangeable with evaporated milk
- **Light corn syrup** keeps the caramel smooth and chewy; honey can be used in equal amount but may change flavor slightly
- **Semisweet chocolate** (bar or chips) should be real chocolate (cocoa butter); compound coating does not temper
- **Nuts**: toasting brings out flavor—hazelnuts *10–12 minutes* (rub off skins in a towel to reduce bitterness) or pecans *8–10 minutes*

## Preparation Tips

- **Caramel**: Use a large, heavy pot so the mixture does not boil over. Stir constantly over medium heat to avoid scorching. Humidity can affect set—if the day is very humid, the caramel may stay slightly softer.
- **Soft-ball stage** ( $235\text{--}240^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) is critical: under  $235^{\circ}\text{F}$  the caramel stays runny; over  $248^{\circ}\text{F}$  it becomes hard. A candy thermometer is the most reliable guide; the cold-water test is a backup.
- **Tempering**: Keep chocolate dry (no water or steam in the bowl). Stir frequently while cooling to  $88\text{--}90^{\circ}\text{F}$ . If the chocolate goes above  $92^{\circ}\text{F}$  after seeding, add a bit more chopped chocolate and stir until it returns to range.
- Cool shortbread and caramel completely before adding chocolate; warm layers will cause the coating to bloom or fail to set properly.

## Make Ahead & Storage

- Bars keep in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to *1 week*
- Serve cold or let stand at room temperature *10–15 minutes* for a slightly softer bite
- Layer bars between parchment if stacking to avoid sticking

## Serving Suggestions

- Serve as a sweet snack or dessert with milk or coffee
- Best eaten within a few days for optimal texture and shine