

Gluten-Free Caramel Chocolate Shortbread Bars

A three-layer bar: tender gluten-free shortbread base, chewy caramel made from sweetened condensed milk and brown sugar cooked to soft-ball stage, and a tempered semisweet chocolate coating. The caramel and chocolate sections include detailed doneness and tempering guidance for first-time makers. Makes 24 small bars.

Ingredients

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

Directions

Preheat oven to 350°F — Line a 9×13-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. 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.
2. Bake at 350°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.

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3. 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**) in a heavy 3–4 qt. saucepan. Clip a candy thermometer to the side so the tip is immersed and not touching the bottom. 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. 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. Continue cooking in *1 minute* increments if still below 235°F . If you have passed 240°F , use as is but expect a firmer chew.
4. Remove the caramel from heat and stir in remaining 1 tsp. **vanilla**. Pour immediately over the cooled shortbread and spread evenly to the edges with a heat-safe spatula.
5. 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.
6. 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°F ; if using a thermometer, remove from heat when melted and around $115\text{--}118^{\circ}\text{F}$.
7. 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.
8. 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*.
9. 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. Serve cool or at room temperature. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator; the bars keep for up to *1 week*.

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Yield

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

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 Bowl (1)
- Hand mixer
- Heat-safe spatula, offset spatula
- Cutting board and sharp knife
- Measuring cups and spoons

Mise en Place

- *Medium Bowl #1* — caramel wet mix: 1 cup packed **brown sugar**, 1 can **sweetened condensed milk**, ¼ cup **corn syrup**, ¼ tsp. **salt**
- *Medium Bowl #2* — 9 oz. chopped **semisweet chocolate** (to melt)
- *Small Bowl #1* — 3 oz. chopped **semisweet chocolate** (seed for tempering)
- Bring 1 cup **butter** (for shortbread) to cool room temperature; have ½ 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

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** (235–240°F) is critical: under 235°F the caramel stays runny; over 248°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 88–90°F. If the chocolate goes above 92°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