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I have to write quickly this morning. Two of my nieces are here for a few days. These not-so-little-anymore girls are asleep upstairs. It is like the calm and quiet before the storm. They'll stumble down the stairs with a few yawns, some mumbled questions and comments. And then, when they are really and truly awake, we will get down to the business of deciding what to do on this rather dreary day.

Which leads to the important question ... what do you do with kids in the country when it's raining? Of course, you can all pile in the car and drive somewhere in about forty-five minutes. Thirty if you're not fussy about speeding tickets. However, that rather defeats the purpose of spending vacation time in the country. In addition, if you haven't discovered the dangers of a trip to the mall or the movies or an arcade with 'tweens and teens, listen up. That funny noise you hear is the sound of your last few bucks being sucked out of your wallet.

If they were younger, we could do the whole camping thing. That's when you set up a tent in the living room and pretend you're camping. If you don't have a tent or it's too big for the living room, a sheet over a smallish table works fine. You can make fishing poles out of sticks and string and safety pins and fish over the deck or the stairwell. Coloring and cutting out paper fish to catch will keep kids busy for a little while.

But my girls have outgrown the tents. As soon the weather breaks, we can head out to explore the damp and dank day. We can do the gnu tour. The challenge is to visit each and every one of New London's twenty-six gnus and then head over to Sunapee Harbor for number twenty-seven. Brightly painted in a variety of colors and styles, the gnus are good for a few pictures, some theatrical poses and a few laughs.

When we have taken enough photographs to fill several scrapbooks, we can head to the beach. You know you are desperate when you spend an afternoon huddled in a sweatshirt, wrapped in a towel, staring glumly at a fog-covered Mount Kearsarge.

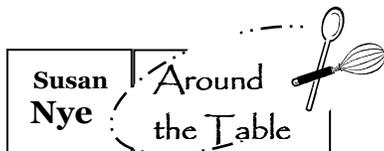
When my sister and I were little, we visited my grandparents every summer. On dreary days, we hung out with Nana in her tiny kitchen. She was always baking something, old-fashioned molasses cookies, hermit bars or blueberry pies or cakes, and she let us help. Baking cookies or brownies is a favorite with my two sleepyheads. I am sure they will be willing if I am able to find the time.

Which brings up another complication; how do you keep kids happy when it's not only raining but you have a ton of work to do (and these few early morning hours aren't enough?) If you're lucky, you have an escape hatch, maybe two, even three. You may be able to drop them off at a neighbors (you are a lifesaver Sue! thanks a million Peg!) or they can spend an afternoon at their grandparents. My mother has always liked board games so maybe I can talk her into challenging the girls to a Scrabble or Monopoly marathon.

Oops! Times up! I hear footsteps on the stairs, that's about it for the calm and quiet until tomorrow morning. Have a wonderful summer with family and friends, big, small and 'tween!

Bon appétit!

Susan



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603/526 7319

Peanut Butter Brownies

Whether I have young helpers in the kitchen or not, these brownies are quick and delicious, a great treat for any summer weekend.

Makes 24 brownies

2 cups flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 cup peanut butter
1/2 cup (1 stick) butter at room temperature
1/2 cup sugar
1/2 cup brown sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla
2 eggs
8 ounces milk chocolate, chopped

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Butter and flour a 9"x13" inch baking pan.

In a medium bowl, whisk together flour, baking soda and salt.

With an electric mixer, beat the peanut butter, butter and sugars on medium-high speed until creamy; beat in eggs and vanilla until smooth.

Reduce speed to low, add the dry ingredients and mix in until just combined. Spread the batter evenly in the prepared pan.

Bake until edges begin to pull away from sides of pan and a toothpick inserted in center comes out with just a few moist crumbs attached, about 20 minutes.

Immediately sprinkle the top of the brownies with chopped milk chocolate. Return to the brownies to the oven for 1-2 minutes. Remove from the oven and spread the chocolate evenly over the top of the brownies. Cool completely in pan, cut and serve.