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Ahh, so many desserts, so little time. Who doesn't love a rich, decadent dessert like luxurious crème caramel or luscious chocolate mousse? Summer wouldn't be summer without fruity desserts like a glorious blueberry pie, strawberry short cake or warm and wonderful peach cobbler. Now that it's fall, apples are in season and we would be remiss if we didn't bake a few pies, cakes and crisps.

And a birthday just wouldn't be a birthday without cake. Or better yet, cupcakes. What's not to love about a cupcake? Simple, delicious, these sweet little treats brings out the kid in all of us (not a bad idea as the number of birthdays begins to mount.)

When we were in elementary school, cupcakes were the all the rage at bake sales and classroom parties. Without fail every classroom had at least one lucky kid whose mom lived to bake. Any holiday, significant or not, was a good excuse for her to break out mixing bowls and muffin tins. Then like June Cleaver incarnate, this domestic diva would sail into our classroom with a Filene's box filled with gorgeous cupcakes. Sporting icing tinted orange for Halloween or green for Saint Paddy's Day, these miniature cakes provided a welcome break from the daily grind of spelling tests and multiplication tables.

I admit I was always a little jealous of those kids, the ones with a super baker for a mom. I imagined that homemade Tollhouse and not Chips Ahoy filled their cookie jars. And I just knew their birthday cakes did not come out of a box. My mother was never one of those June Cleaver-type mothers. She had and still has many wonderful qualities but she did not live to cook. When it came to baking, she played sous-chef to Betty Crocker, Duncan Hines and the Pillsbury Dough Boy. And even then, her baking pans were more or less empty except for the holidays or when company came for dinner or the weekend.

Not just for elementary school, cupcakes are definitely in vogue these days. Simple and sweet, too small to be sinful, you can find them in trendy bakeries in fashion conscious cities from coast to coast. Unfortunately, it's a bit of a hike from New Hampshire to Beverly Hills, Greenwich Village or Harvard Square; even if the cupcakes are fabulous. Still there is no need to feel deprived or do without. Dig those muffin tins out from the back of the cupboard and make your own. Before long, your house will be filled with the warm, sugary scent of your own fabulous cupcakes.

Holidays and celebrations just cry out for a festive mini-dessert. Halloween is just days away and Thanksgiving is not far behind. If you have one of those significant birthdays coming up, think about trading in that big old cake for forty perfect little confections. Or is it fifty, sixty or seventy-five year?

Adding to the fun, these miniature treats just beg for a little enhancement and your creative touch. Unless you are a real decorating pro, you don't need to spend an entire afternoon piping flowers and curlicues. Add a couple of drops of food coloring to ordinary frosting and you'll have cupcakes that are pretty in pink or merry in red. Add some sprinkles, a few candies or a perfect berry for a fun and festive finish to any party.

But why wait for a party? Any day is a great day for a cupcake, especially when it is cold and blustery or raining and threatening to snow. Now is the perfect time to invite a few friends over for a cup of tea and charm them with one of life's little luxuries. Enjoy!

Bon appétit!

Susan

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Pumpkin Cupcakes

A delicious fall treat! Enjoy!
Makes 24 muffins

- 2 3/4 cups all purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons ground ginger
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cloves
- 1/4 teaspoon nutmeg
- 1 1/2 teaspoons baking soda
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup light brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1/2 cup canola oil
- 3 large eggs
- 1 15-ounce can pure pumpkin
- 1/2 cup maple syrup or molasses
- 1/2 cup milk
- 1/2 cup sour cream
- Cream Cheese Frosting
- Decoration: candy corn (optional)

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line 24 standard (1/3-cup) muffin cups with paper liners.

Whisk flour, ginger, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, baking soda and salt together into medium bowl.

Using an electric mixer, beat the sugar and oil in large bowl. Add in the eggs, 1 at a time, mixing well after each addition. Beat in the pumpkin, maple syrup, milk, sour cream and vanilla. Stir in flour mixture.

Divide the batter among prepared muffin cups. Bake until a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean, about 30 minutes. Transfer the cupcakes to a rack to cool. When the cupcakes have cooled completely, frost with cream cheese frosting and decorate with candy corn.

Cream Cheese Frosting

- 8 ounces cream cheese, at room temperature
- 1/4 cup (1/2 stick) softened butter
- 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
- Red & yellow food coloring (optional)
- About 4 cups confectioners' sugar

Put the cream cheese and butter in a large bowl; beat with an electric mixer on medium speed until smooth, add the vanilla extra and combine.

Slowly add the confectioners' sugar and mix until well blended. A few drops at a time, beat in red and yellow food coloring until you get a nice pumpkin color. Increase mixer speed and continue beating for 2 to 3 minutes, until the frosting is light and fluffy.

