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I've said it before and I'll say it again, I love Christmas. From start to finish, I love the whole nine yards, the whole darn season. I confess I rarely leap into the fray on Black Friday. I like to savor Thanksgiving for a few days, make turkey noodle soup* and relax.

However, by the first of December, I am hopelessly in the spirit. I start tunelessly humming Christmas carols and don't stop until after New Year's. More important, I channel my inner decorator. There's nothing like a few decorations and a house filled with greenery to get into the spirit.

If I don't get my dates mixed up, I buy a tree from the Boy Scouts. Otherwise, I visit the farm stand. Next, I scavenge the woods behind my house for greens, branches of bright red winterberry and pinecones. Finally, I lug in four big boxes of decorations from the garage.

To set the perfect mood, I track down my collection of Christmas CD's and load them up. Nat King Cole, Andrea Bocelli and Michael Bubl  fill the house with song while I deck the halls. Bunches of greens, holly and juniper provide a bit of cheer at the front door and back. More greens are slung onto the mantle. Candles go in the windows. Festive grapevine wreaths are hung inside and out. I wrestle the tree into its stand, string it with lights and cover it with ornaments. The house sparkles with lights and color and is filled with the wonderful scent of pine and spruce.

Every year I come up with a couple of clever projects and homemade gifts for the holidays. I bake cookies or make candy and pack them up in tins or shiny bags. Sometimes I make chocolate sauce by the gallon or tapenade by the quart. One year, I knitted nonstop until late Christmas Eve to give scarves to all the girls. Another time I spent hours and hours decorating grapevine wreaths with greens, pinecones, birds, baubles and bows. Pass me a pinecone and I'll figure out something to do with it. My sister claims I am a frustrated pre-school teacher. She could be right.

None of this festive homemaking and crafting is new. It started when I was just a kid. My teachers and Girl Scout leaders conspired to get me hooked on pipe cleaners and glitter. Throughout December art classes and troop meetings were devoted to making glittery decorations and gifts. We glued strip after strip of construction paper into colorful chains. We could have wrapped the globe ten or fifteen times. Well not quite, but our festive paper chains ran up and down the halls, in and out of every classroom and around the gym. Our class pictures were pasted onto glittery Popsicle stick frames to hang on the tree. Wreaths were fashioned out of penny candies. Our hands and feet were immortalized in plaster of Paris.

My mom even joined the conspiracy. My sister and I helped her make sugar cookies and string popcorn with cranberries for the tree. I suspect more popcorn was eaten than strung. As got we older, Mom found projects to keep the two of us busy and make the house beautiful. I remember spending several afternoons gluing macaroni onto cardboard circles. Wary that we would spray each other instead of the pasta, Mom then took over. She gave our little creations a coat of gold spray paint, stuck a candle in the center and set them on the dining room table. I was convinced that it was pure decorating genius.

Enjoy the holiday season with a little music, some baking and a few baubles, bows and pinecones!

Bon app tit!

Susan

*You can find my favorite recipe for Chicken (or Turkey) Noodle Soup in my recipe archives – scroll down to January 2010.

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Chocolate Dipped Orange Caramels

Make up a batch and keep handy for a mid afternoon pick-me-up or hostess gift. Enjoy!

Makes 36 pieces

2 cups sugar
1/2 cup fresh orange juice
1/2 teaspoon kosher or sea salt
1 cup heavy cream
5 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 tablespoon pure vanilla extract
1 tablespoon Grand Marnier
3-4 ounces bittersweet chocolate, broken in pieces*
3-4 ounces semisweet chocolate, broken in pieces*

Line the bottom of an 8x8 inch baking pan with nonstick foil or parchment paper brushed lightly with oil.

Combine the sugar, orange juice and salt in a 3 quart pot. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Continue to boil, swirling the pan from time to time, until the caramel is golden brown.

While the caramel is bubbling, cut the butter into small pieces and heat the cream to a simmer.

When the caramelized sugar is the right color, add the butter and whisk to combine. Be careful, it will bubble up. When the butter is well combined, add the cream and whisk to combine.

Continue to boil the caramel cream until it reaches 255 degrees on a candy thermometer. Remove from the heat and stir in the vanilla and Grand Marnier. Carefully pour the hot caramel into the prepared pan, cool to room temperature and refrigerate until firm.

When the caramel is cool, use the foil or parchment paper to lift the caramel out of the pan. Cut the slab of caramel into 36 pieces.

Put 3/4 of the chocolate in a small glass bowl and zap in the microwave for 1 minute. Give the chocolate a stir. Assuming it has not melted completely, return the chocolate to the microwave and zap for 10-15 seconds. Continue to zap and stir until the chocolate reaches 110-115 degrees. I use an instant read thermometer to check the temperature. Stir in the remaining chocolate and let it sit for 1 minute. Give it a stir. It should be nice and shiny.

Dip one end of each caramel in the melted chocolate. Transfer the dipped chocolate to a tray lined with parchment paper to cool and harden. Store in the refrigerator. Remove from the refrigerator about 30 minutes before serving.

** If you prefer, you can use all bittersweet, all semisweet or all milk chocolate.*

