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Sweet Holidays to You & Ginger Crème Brûlée

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It was a long time ago but looking back, I am filled with sympathy for the poor postman who came to our house everyday on Jackson Road. It wasn't the dogs in the neighborhood, they were friendly. It was the holidays. Throughout December in freezing rain, sleet and snow he dragged his overloaded bag down slippery sidewalks and clamored over snow banks to reach our front door. Not just Christmas cards, he came bearing gifts. A few were from distant relatives but most were from business friends and colleagues of my dad's. There were weighty ceramic crocks filled with cheese from Wisconsin and boxes of fruit from Florida.

One year the mailman brought us a fruitcake. I guess it was our turn.

It is not clear which was heaviest, the five pounds of cheese encased in thick crockery, the bushel of oranges or the fruitcake. Hailed as deluxe and coming all the way from Texas, that cake was studded with pecans and chock full of icky-sticky, brightly colored candied fruit. I know because, against my mother's better judgment, I insisted that we try it

Mom was pessimistic and tried to dissuade me. But already a budding foodie and curious about most things culinary, my argument was simple. We liked fruit. We like cake. We liked my grandmother's blueberry cake which combined fruit and cake. It only made sense that we would like this fruitcake from Texas.

I can't be sure but I think I caught her in a moment of weakness. I'm guessing Mom was contemplating re-gifting and no doubt feeling guilty about it. She shouldn't have been. As far as experts can determine there are only a couple hundred fruitcakes in existence. It only seems like more because they continually circle the globe in an endless cycle of re-gifting.

When I found her at the kitchen table with the fruitcake, Mom was checking her list in hopes of finding a good candidate for this hefty delight. Of course she couldn't give it to the mailman. He's the one who'd brought this plague of a gift into our house in the first place. The milkman, the cleaning lady and my great-aunt Bess were almost certainly on the list of possibilities. I interrupted her dithering and suggested that we try some. To her credit, Mom tried to explain the truth about fruitcake but I was seven or eight and innocent enough to think that cake was ... well ... cake.

That was the first, last and only time I've eaten fruitcake from Texas. Fancy tin or not, I've not been fooled again.

This doesn't mean I've turned my back on sweet yuletide treats. Far from it. Over the years I've discovered that some, like ribbon candy, look better than they taste. Others, like sugar cookies and Aunt Anna's Pecan Pie are nothing less than holiday kitchen icons. And yes, I've been drawn in by some new trend or a glossy photograph on more than one occasion.

The first time it was Bûche de Noel. I was in high school and spotted one of these magnificent cakes on the cover of *Ladies Home Journal* or maybe it was *McCall's*. Thinking it would give our Christmas Eve table a little continental flare, Bûche de Noel became my contribution to the family feast. After a few years, I got bored with the Bûche but have continued to create an ever-changing parade of festive holiday treats. Everything from cookies, cookies and more cookies to chocolate cakes and crème brûlée have made their way into and out of my oven.

And yes, I do take requests.

Best wishes for a sweet holiday and bon appétit!

Ginger Crème Brûlée

This is my latest favorite Christmas Eve dessert. I served it for the first time last year and it was so good it's on for an encore! Enjoy!

Serves 6-8

3 cups heavy cream
2 tablespoons minced ginger
1 large egg
5 large egg yolks
1/2 cup brown sugar
Pinch salt
1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
1 tablespoon pure vanilla extract
1 tablespoon dark rum
1-2 teaspoons sugar for each serving

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees.

Stirring occasionally, bring the cream and ginger to a simmer in a heavy saucepan over low heat. Remove the pan from the heat and let it steep for about 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, combine the egg, egg yolks, brown sugar, salt and cinnamon with an electric mixer on low speed.

With the mixer on medium speed, very slowly add the warm cream to the eggs. (If you add it too quickly or in one go, the warm cream could scramble the eggs.) Add the vanilla and rum and combine. Strain the custard through a fine-mesh sieve into a large measuring cup. Pour the custard into 4- or 6-ounce ramekins until almost full.



Arrange the ramekins in a baking or roasting pan. Carefully pour boiling water into the pan until it comes about halfway up the sides of the ramekins. Bake for about 40 minutes or until the custards are set. Add more water to the pan if needed.

Carefully remove the ramekins from the water bath, cool to room temperature and refrigerate for at least two hours.

To serve, sprinkle 1-2 teaspoons sugar evenly over the top of each custard and heat with a kitchen blowtorch until the sugar caramelizes. Let the crème brûlées sit for a minute or two until the caramelized sugar hardens and serve.