

Cooking Parties & Classes

December

5 Tapas & Finger Food

January

11 French Country Cooking

25 Italian Country Kitchen

February

15 French Country Cooking

29 Italian Country Kitchen

March

15 Mediterranean Easter Feast

28 Tapas & Finger Food

April

11 Italian Country Kitchen

25 French Country Cooking

May

9 Italian Country Kitchen

23 French Country Cooking

June

6 Summer Salads

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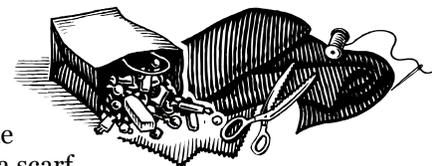
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Every year I hear the same complaint; Christmas has become too commercial. People mumble and grumble and worry that the holiday is all about buying and taking and not giving. Charlie Brown has been in despair over the madness for more than four decades. I don't care, I love Christmas. Sure the stores are filled with frenzied chaos, holiday advertising is merciless and catalogs overwhelm the post office. It doesn't matter, I still love the spirit of Christmas, traditions old and new and all of the hustle and bustle.

Every year I look forward to watching sappy Christmas movies. I particularly like the ones which make me shed a tear or two. Even on the most frigid day, I like going out and getting my wreaths and a tree. I love bringing out my collection of decorations, tchotchkes and dust collectors and decking the halls. I am particularly fond of those little white lights and string them along my fence posts, wrap them around my tree and sprinkle them throughout the house. When I was little we had big multicolored lights. At five or six I thought they were wonderful; today they would probably be considered retro.

I don't even mind shopping, although over the past few years I have made more and more of my gifts. I have made wreaths and topiaries and tree ornaments. Last year was a scarf year. I don't really knit, but I can make scarves so I made at least a half a dozen, probably more. I have created gift bags with homemade cookies and candies as well as savory dips and tapenades. I create my own little version of Santa's workshop, by putting on Christmas music and going to work, mixing, rolling and dipping; gluing, sewing and knitting.



Making holiday gifts and decorations is nothing new. My mother still uses the wreath that her mother made with artificial sugared fruit more than 50 years ago. I remember my Mom wielding cans of gold paint and spraying anything from pinecones to wreaths made from cork screw, bow tie and wagon wheel pasta or crèche figures made from rags, Styrofoam balls and pipe cleaners. It is amazing how a little gold paint can transform the ordinary to the extraordinary; at least for a six year old.

In elementary school our teachers helped us out with gifts for our parents every year. I think I was in the first grade when I made my favorite gift for my Mom. It was a magnificent pair of plaster of Paris earrings. I thought they were absolutely beautiful and very festive. We started with big globs of plaster and after they hardened we painted them red or green. I chose red. We added a big spot of glue in the center and sprinkled them with glitter and attached clasps to the back. My mother bravely wore those earrings for an hour or two. They weighed a ton and the clasps were like miniature bear traps.

Fast-forward several years to college when I discovered baker's dough and made chubby little Santas and red nosed reindeer. I was an art major and got carried away so I also made taxi cabs, suns, stars, moons and a bunch of fruits and vegetables as well as Adam and Eve. Over time all of these decorations have broken or been eaten by mice, except for Eve. I still make tree ornaments every year or so. Last year it was loons nesting on pinecones. It is great fun creating these mini-masterpieces and sharing them with family and friends.

Today my kitchen table and counters are covered with felt, buttons, beads and yarn. Chocolate almond brittle is cooling on the porch and cookies are baking in the oven. I don't worry about Christmas being too commercial. Like most things, Christmas is what you make it. Enjoy the holiday and make it your own,

Bon appétit! - Susan



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Christmas Cookies and Candies

Making cookies have always been a big part of the Christmas holiday tradition. Here are a few treats to try; each takes a little different twist on an old favorite. Enjoy!

Cranberry-Orange Pastries

Makes about 24 mini pastries

3/4 cup cranberries
1 orange
1/2 cup sugar and more as needed
1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon ground ginger
Pinch nutmeg
Pinch of salt
1 tablespoon Grand-Marnier (optional)
Sweet flakey pastry (recipe follows)
1 egg yolk
2 tablespoons of heavy cream

1. With a medium-fine grater, grate the orange peel. Then peel completely, removing all the white pith from the orange. Supreme the oranges. Squeeze orange juice out of remaining orange skin.
2. In a small saucepan combine the cranberries, orange sections, zest and juice, sugar, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg and salt. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to low and simmer until cranberries are tender, stirring occasionally about 10-15 minutes. Add the Grand Marnier and stir to combine. Taste and add more sugar, if necessary. Cool completely.
3. Place a rack in the center of the oven and preheat the oven to 400 degrees.
4. On a lightly floured surface, roll out the pastry to about 1/8-inch thick. With a biscuit cutter, cut out 2-3 inch rounds of pastry. Brush the edges of each round with a little water; put 1/2 - 1 teaspoon of cranberry-orange filling in the center of each pastry round. Fold in half and pinch edges closed and then crimp the edges of the pastry with a fork. Transfer to a sheet pan lined with parchment paper.
5. Whisk the egg yolk and cream together in a small bowl; brush the pastries with egg wash, sprinkle with sugar, make a couple of small slits and bake for 10-12 minutes, until puffed and golden. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Sweet Flakey Pastry

1 cup all purpose flour
2 tablespoons sugar
1/2 teaspoon salt
4 tablespoons (1/2 stick) chilled butter, cut into pieces
3 tablespoons solid vegetable shortening, cold
2-4 tablespoons ice water

1. Blend flour, sugar and salt a food processor. Add butter and shortening; and process until mixture resembles coarse meal.
2. Sprinkle with ice water, 1-2 tablespoons at a time, and process until dough comes together in a ball. Flatten into disk. Wrap dough in plastic; chill until firm enough to roll, at least 30 minutes.



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Spicy Gingerbread Cookies

8 ounces (2 sticks) unsalted butter, softened at room temperature
3/4 cup packed light brown sugar
1 egg
1/2 cup dark molasses
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
3 1/4 cups all purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
2 teaspoons ground ginger
1/4 teaspoon ground cloves
1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper
Icing (recipe follows)

Decoration: raisins, white, milk or semisweet chocolate chips, various food coloring and colors of sanding sugar

1. In a mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, cream the butter until smooth. Add the sugar and combine; add the egg and combine. Add the molasses and vanilla and combine.
2. In a large bowl whisk together the flour, baking soda, salt, cinnamon, ginger, cloves and cayenne pepper. Add the dry ingredients to the butter-sugar mixture a little at a time, mixing after each addition until just combined. Shape the dough into a thick disk, wrap in plastic and refrigerate at least 2 hours.
3. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease 1 or 2 cookie sheets. On a lightly floured surface, roll the dough out 1/4-inch thick and cut out with cookie cutters. Decorate with raisins or chocolate chips. Bake until firm, 8 to 10 minutes and let cool on the pan.
4. Meanwhile, divide the icing into several small bowls; add a few drops of food coloring to each. Using a pastry bag fitted with the smallest plain tip, pipe white or colored icing onto the cookies and coat with sanding sugar.

Icing

1 cup confectioners' sugar, sifted
1 to 2 tablespoons milk

1. With a hand mixer, blend the confectioners' sugar and milk together. Add more sugar or milk to get a pipe-able consistency.



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Chocolate Almond Brittle

1/2 cup whole almonds, toasted
1/2 cup each – semi sweet, milk and white chocolate chips
1 cup coconut, toasted
3 cups sugar
1/2 cup water

1. In a medium bowl, toss together the almonds, chocolate chips and coconut. Put them on a baking sheet lined with silpat, spreading them out into an even single layer.
2. In a medium saucepan stir together the sugar and the water. Cook over medium-high heat, stirring until sugar dissolves. Do not stir after that. Instead, using a pastry brush dipped in water; brush the sides of the pan a few times to incorporate any sugar that has stuck to the sides of the pan. Continue cooking until the sugar syrup turns golden brown, about 15 to 20 minutes.
3. Carefully pour the caramelized sugar over the nut mixture and let cool. Be careful not to move the cookie sheet after the sugar has been poured. The baking sheet will be very hot; let cool for at least 2 hours.
4. Break the brittle into pieces and serve.