

Sweet treat to dip into

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Those who prefer to skip the tempering process can buy chocolate pellets, essentially a coating of cocoa with vegetable fats instead of cocoa butter. Since vegetable fat withstands heating, tempering is unnecessary, advises Tonia Patsalis, owner of Kitchen Glamour shops in Bedford, Rochester and West Blocton. This product, called eastchester or westchester, results in a less-rich-tasting candy but requires less detailed monitoring as it melts.

However, when melting eastchester or westchester, the water at the bottom of a double boiler should reach a maximum of 140 degrees.

Both processes require a thermometer and a wooden spoon.

No matter the kind of chocolate

product used, excessive heat and humidity cause it to crystallize, turn rubbery or acquire a gritty texture. Improper heating or direct exposure to water can result in white spots on the candy or lines and cracks.

First-time chocolate makers should take heart. Although she learned the craft at her mother's knee, Higbie has perfected her skills through the occasional error.

"I've had lots of catastrophes," she says. One unseasonably warm year, the temperature outside was about 70 degrees when she began to temper chocolate. "I wasted about 30 pounds of candy," she says.

NOW, IF THE temperature outside rises, the air conditioner is turned on inside, even in November. "Chocolate is temperamental. If

it's cold or hot, it does a lot of things to chocolate," she says.

Since it's advisable to work with only one pound of chocolate at a time, Higbie's electric kettle keeps humming through the night. "I put the chocolates in at 100 degrees and let it set there and retemper the next morning. It's hardly ever really off."

Whether novices or pros, candy makers hone their craft through experience. "Even with a teacher, you learn your own technique. You learn to do what's easiest and most efficient for you," Higbie says.

With the amount of time invested in making her annual batch of chocolates, she insists on buying the best chocolate she can. She buys ingredients without preservatives. "You can freeze them, but my chocolates don't last forever," she says.

How Willie Wonkas began

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THEY ALL share the conviction that each makes the best there is. Like their amateur counterparts, they credit meticulous attention to detail for their success.

Hamilin learned his craft from George Kimnitz, the store's namesake and former owner.

"He stayed for six months and taught us the recipes. I still get out the recipes each time I make candy," Hamilin said. "I don't take a chance."

Just as home bakers have discovered, Hamilin swears that timing, temperature and humidity act as crucial elements in chocolate making.

"Timing is essential," Gruenwald said. "Fudge is the most exacting. It's so difficult to make and have it turn out perfect."

PEANUT BRITTLE poses a challenge to the pros.

"You have leather gloves on to

pull the brittle," Hamilin said. "You try to get it as thin as possible. We try to get it one peanut thick."

The way Hamilin does it, it's a two-person job. But it's tough to keep the peanut brittle from setting quickly.

"We have three minutes to work on it," Hamilin said.

EVEN PROS get stung by humid weather. Hamilin still grimaces about the time last summer that hot weather helped ruin two batches of chocolate set too fast. That snafu cost him 40 pounds of sugar, too.

Consider that he turns out 90-100 pounds of chocolate creams in a morning's work. But the real challenge lies in turning out chocolate nougats, he said. It's a time-consuming task to take a three-by-six-foot slab of chocolate and cut it into 1/4-by-1/4-inch pieces.

"On a real moist day out it sticks to the knife," Hamilin said.

EACH CANDY maker credited cu-

linary success with using good ingredients. None used chocolate with a wax surface.

"People are tired of junk," Hessler said. "We don't make so much. We make small quantities. I make 10 pounds of creams at a time."

Knowledge increases the chances for making good candy.

"People buy milk chocolate. I try to tell them what to do but you can't put it on a burner," Hamilin said. "It'll scorch. It has to be done very slowly with a double boiler. If you don't know what to do it won't come out."

Leave as little as possible to chance, he advises.

"You can't trust this to chance. Get a thermometer. Do it the way it should be done."

There's another hidden reward to making good candy, the professionals say.

"When they come out right, there's a sense of pride there," Hamilin said.

Forget 'jellied' cranberries

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aid in urinary tract infections. Seems that the acid in the cranberries does something or other to dissolve miniature blockages that form

Wash and sort cranberries. Peel oranges; remove all membranes and seeds. Cut sections in half. Peel and dice apple. Combine all ingredients in a saucepan and bring to a boil over medium heat. Reduce heat, cover and simmer for 30 minutes. Cool and store in the refrigerator in covered containers.

Infections. Add to that the fact that cranberries are a natural astringent and were used by the Indians to heal wounds. The astringent effect contracts the wound and helps stop the bleeding.

The next time you visit the grocer or produce palace, pick up a pound of fresh cranberries — and give your holiday table a crisp, fresh, red zing. Bon appetit!

ures before serving. Top with whipped cream and fresh berries to garnish.

SPICED CRANBERRY PUNCH

1/4 cup sugar
1 cup water
1/2 teaspoon whole cloves
3 cinnamon sticks
2 cups cranberry juice
1/2 cup lemon juice
1 cup orange juice
3 cups ginger ale
1 fifth rum (optional)
fresh cranberries to garnish

Mix sugar, water, cloves and cinnamon in a saucepan. Boil for minutes. Strain; cool. Combine sugar water with remaining ingredients. Pour into a punchbowl and garnish with an ice ring made with fresh cranberries and orange slices.

Open-face sandwich versatile

AP — Try this easy open-face sandwich for lunch, supper, a snack or even brunch. You can prepare the cheese sauce in the microwave oven while the muffins toast.

MEKI-CHEESE MELTS

1/2 of an 8-ounce package cheese spread with jalapeno peppers, cubed (1 cup)
2 tablespoons milk
2 English muffins, split and toasted
1 small tomato, cut into 4 slices
1 small avocado, cut into 4 slices

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