

taste buds

chef Larry Janes

## Start your ovens for fruitcake

It's getting close to Christmas and good holiday cooks know that now is the time to start making fruitcakes so that they have enough time to age and mellow before Christmas.

Janes Gang fruitcakes were always more highly regarded than what is normally accepted about this sweet, fruit laden confection.

FRUITCAKES WERE always baked in a loaf pan and I never knew bakers used other pans until Aunt Edna came up from Florida one year with what looked like a burnt Frisbie. That fruitcake tasted like what television ads portray as fruitcakes. In all honesty, though, Aunt Edna was never much of a baker.

The beginner fruitcaker should know that fruitcakes can be baked in all sizes and shapes. Whatever pan or mold is used, it should be greased, lined with parchment or brown paper and greased again. Momma spends one entire morning just preparing her pans. A basic 8 1/2 by 1 1/2 by 2 1/2 inch loaf pan will hold about 4 cups of batter and this will take about 2 hours to bake. A three quart tube or bundt pan, however, using about 2 quarts of batter will take about 2 1/2 hours.

A favorite of mine is a soup can. These make great "individual" fruitcakes that can easily be sliced for appetizers or finger-food desserts and are great for a buffet table. Figure on a small soup can holding about 1/2 cup of batter and baking for about 45-50 minutes.

WHEN SHOPPING for ingredients for any fruitcake, it's a good idea to know about bulk equivalents. No one needs 8 extra cups of dried fruit laying around. For starters, a pound of raisins, dried apricots, prunes, dried peaches, dried pears or figs will measure 3-3 1/4 cups. A pound of fresh dates or cut up candied fruits and peels will measure 2 cups. A pound of dried apples will yield about 5 cups while a pound of shelled almonds or brazil nuts will yield three cups and a pound of shelled walnuts will yield 4 cups.

One of the big secrets successful fruitcake bakers use is to remember to always grease your pans well. Make sure to grease the parchment paper lining also. If you don't have parchment, a heavy, unbleached brown paper bag will do as well as heavy waxed paper. Fill the pans only 1/2 full and bake in a preheated 275 or 300 degree oven.

For the best fruitcakes, place a pan of water in the bottom of the oven for added humidity. This little trick-of-the-trade almost eliminates a "peaking" center that usually cracks and makes for an unappetizing cake. You can tell if your cakes are cooked throughout by using the old tried and true test by inserting a toothpick or cake tester in the center and when it comes out clean, it's done. You can decorate the tops of the cakes with cherries, almonds and fruit pressed into them before baking begins. They will not darken and will stay on the cakes and you will not have to decorate them after they are cooled.

THE REASON momma's fruitcakes are so treasured during the holidays must be her soaking with rum and brandy. Momma doesn't believe in pastry brushes so she uses a clean dish towel to add rum and brandy slowly over the top of each one precisely when they emerge from the oven. In 15 minutes, invert, remove the baking paper and add more rum and brandy. This must be done gradually, but remember that the warm cake absorbs the liquid better than a cold one. When cooled, wrap and place in airtight containers.

If fruitcakes are your fancy, start now so that you'll have some time to enjoy the holidays a little more.

See recipes inside.

# Scotch holiday hassles

## Wrap up easy to make shortbread

By Carl Rinschler  
special writer

IT'S HOLIDAY time again, and as usual, you're trying to do it all! If you're like me, the holiday season is just not the same without home baked cookies to give to family and friends.

Page through any cookie cookbook and you'll find page after page of colorful trees, stars and snowmen which all add up to four to five hours of mixing, rolling, cutting and frosting.

AN AN alternative, Betty Kneen of Bloomfield Hills, simply mixes an old-fashioned Scottish shortbread recipe and wraps them in cellophane and Satin ribbons for gift giving.

Having lived in Beaumaris, Australia for nearly five years, Kneen enjoyed the shortbread which was often served at tea time during the holidays. Her neighbor Olwyn McQueen in Beaumaris, a suburb of Melbourne, often made shortbread and shared her recipe with Kneen.

The ingredients are few, butter, flour, rice flour and castor sugar. "At first I had some difficulty making shortbread when I returned back to states. Castor sugar is different than the sugar here, but superfine sugar works well as a substitute."

THE DOUGH was mixed by hand and then fit into the spongecake pan. As with all traditional Scottish shortbread the surface was poked all over with the tines of a fork and then scored into wedges with a knife.

"My neighbor Olwyn always said that the purpose of scoring the dough before baking made it easier to break into wedges later because it's considered unlucky to cut it with a knife," said Kneen.

In Scotland, no holiday season is complete without shortbread. The Ackroyd family, owners of Ackroyd's Scotch Bakery in Redford and the Scottish Bakehouse in Birmingham, have been making shortbread for 40 years.

Their shortbread is based on a very simple recipe with three ingredients, butter, flour and sugar. "When my dad started the business, he kept experimenting to get the best flavor when baking in large quantities," said Ackroyd. "All ingredients are blended together, the



DAH DEAN/staff photographer

Betty Kneen wraps up shortbread, an easy to make holiday gift.

dough is fit into large, heavy baking pans.

The Ackroyd's use a large Scottish board to imprint the all-over design which is similar to pricking with the tines of a fork.

SEARCHING FOR that one original recipe is futile. Or as Ackroyd so succinctly said, "there are probably as many shortbread recipes as there are families in Scotland." Some use rice flour in combination with all-purpose flour, others will add

cornstarch. There are recipes using brown sugar, castor sugar, superfine sugar, or confectioner's sugar. The only ingredient of which there is an agreement is that shortbread must contain butter.

As with an recipe steeped in tradition, there are a number of variations on the basic theme. Some recipes are flavored with lemon or orange zest, almond flavoring or ground almonds and even an English cook's solution to dispensing of leftover mince meat.

Shortbread is easy to make, but needs some special care when the dough is blended together. Since butter is the only shortening agent and source of moisture, it's imperative to use the freshest, top quality butter available. Keep it properly stored and away from other refrigerated foods because it will easily take on other flavors.

WHEN SOFTENING the butter, be careful not to allow the butter to get too warm and melt. When butter

melts, the fat separates and will result in a more coarse textured shortbread.

All purists strongly recommended creaming the butter together with the sugar by hand or with a wooden spoon. A simple rubber dough of flour, sugar and water will produce the most tender shortbread.

When using a mixer to blend the ingredients, keep a watchful eye to avoid over-mixing.

See recipes inside.

## Fire up parties with nachos

By Betsy Brethen  
special writer

Can you believe that December is back — already? Regardless of your religious preference, the season of light is upon us. It's time to "fire up" for the festivities that go hand in hand with this busy time of year.

And, speaking of fire, this week's Winner Dinner, submitted by Judd Hart of Troy, features a main dish that was one of his specialties in his former life as a fireman for the city of Birmingham.

HART'S WIFE, Alicia, collaborated with him on the menu, and came up with a meal that is ideally suited for casual holiday get-togethers with family and friends.

Featuring recipes for Firehouse Nacho Casserole, Guacamole Stuffed Tomatoes and North of the Border-Margarita Pie. It is easy to understand why this tasty meal was always a hit at the firehouse. It is sure to get the bells ringing at your house as well.

Hart and his wife live in Troy with their two young daughters. They are eagerly anticipating the arrival of baby number three.

Hart no longer works for the Birmingham Fire Department because the tree business he started in the early '70s has blossomed into more than a full-time career. His company, J.H. Hart Urban Forestry, specializes in all aspects of tree and shrub care, except spraying, as well as snow removal and firewood delivery. Not surprisingly, his company is one of the largest non-franchised tree services in the state.

HART SERVES the city of Troy as a volunteer fireman and continues to enjoy his reputation as "King of the Kitchen," crediting always his mentors at both the Adams Road and



JIM RICHIE/staff photographer

Judd Hart of Troy and his daughters, Meghan, 3, and Ashley, 18 months, present a family favorite — Firehouse Nacho Casserole.

Chesterfield fire stations for teaching him all he knows.

We salute you, Judd Hart, and thank you for sharing your delicious recipes with us. All the best to you and your family, and thanks too, for all you do to prevent the home fires from burning.

It's easy to submit recipes to be considered for publication in the Winner Dinner column. Submit a re-

cipe for your family's favorite dinner, entree, dessert and salad. We're looking for hearty soup and casserole recipes, low fat and ethnic dishes.

Submit recipes to: Winner Dinner, P.O. Box 3503, Birmingham, MI 48012.

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OBSERVER & ECCENTRIC

### WINNER DINNER

#### Recipes

#### FIREHOUSE NACHO CASSEROLE

Always a favorite at the firehouse, this quick and easy recipe can be made early in the day and then heated just prior to serving. This recipe serves 6-8.

- 1 bag cheese-flavored (or plain) tortilla chips
- 1 cup Monterey Jack cheese, shredded
- 2 pounds ground beef or ground turkey
- 2 packages taco seasoning mix
- 1 red onion, chopped
- 3 1/2 green onions, chopped, including green ends
- 1 medium-sized green pepper, chopped
- 1 small red pepper, chopped
- Jalapeno peppers to taste, chopped (optional)
- 1 can pitted black olives, sliced, 6 ounce size
- 2 medium-sized tomatoes, chopped
- 1 cup Swiss cheese, shredded
- 1 cup sharp cheddar cheese, shredded

Brown the meat and drain off the fat. Mix in the two packages of taco seasoning mix and cook according to the directions on the package. Spray a 9 x 13 Pyrex baking dish with a non-stick spray and layer the ingredients in the order as listed above. Bake at 300 degrees or 20-30 minutes or until the cheese is melted and bubbly. Serve with salsa and sour cream or Ranch dressing.

- 1 cup crumbled Doritos or real bacon bits (optional)
- Combine the first five ingredients. Slice tops off of tomatoes, hollow them out and add chopped pulp to the guacamole mixture. Fill the tomatoes with the guacamole and add to with the crumbled chips or bacon bits. Place them in a shallow casserole and bake in a 350 degree oven for 20 minutes. They are also delicious served cold as a salad. This recipe serves 8 but may be cut in half to make four.

#### NORTH-OF-THE-BORDER MARGARITA PIE

Use a ready-made graham cracker pie crust or make your own, using the following recipe: 1 1/2 cups graham cracker crumbs 3 tablespoons sugar 3/4 cup margarine, melted (Combine the crumbs, sugar and melted margarine until thoroughly blended and pack firmly into a 9-inch pie pan, pressing the mixture firmly to the bottom and sides of the pie dish. Bake in a 350 degree oven for 8 minutes and chill before filling.)

FILLING Grated rind and juice from 1 lime, about 1/2 cup juice 1/2 cup margarita mix, with or without Tequila or Triple Sec (lemon or lime juice may be substituted for the margarita mix) 4 egg yolks 1 can condensed milk 1 stiffly beaten egg white

Mix the first four ingredients and fold into egg white. Set aside. Beat three egg whites until almost stiff and gradually add 6 tablespoons sugar and 1/2 teaspoon cream of tartar. Pour the margarita mixture into the graham cracker pie shell and pile on the meringue. Bake until golden brown at 350 degrees for about 15 minutes. Serve cold and garnish with lime slices.

GUACAMOLE STUFFED TOMATOES 1 cup mashed avocado (2 avocados) 1 can diced green chiles, 4 ounces can 1 tablespoon lime juice 1 teaspoon salt 3 tablespoons chopped green onions, including some of the green ends 8 medium-sized tomatoes