

TASTE

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TASTE BUDDS



CHEF LARRY JAMES

Easy gourmet goodies make merry holiday gifts

It's amazing how many enjoyable things there are to do year-round in anticipation of the holidays. You can dry spring and summer flowers and herbs for holiday bouquets, and search garage sales and flea markets for vintage toys and gifts.

There are all sorts of recipes for gift giving any time of the year. Unfortunately, the James Gang does not have time, energy or financial resources to be as imaginative as Martha Stewart during the busiest time of the year.

Not that there's anything wrong with Martha Stewart. But I can assure you that Martha has never stood in line at Meijer's with two cranky kids, a full grocery cart and realized, all of a sudden, that the checkbook was in the glove compartment of the 1985 Toyota parked in the parking lot.

Some families are full of creative relatives who crochet tissue box covers, afghans and slippers. The craftiest anyone in our family ever got was a few years back when Aunt Vickie gave us all a jar of her "holiday jam." Upon serving it Christmas morning, everyone noticed a remarkable resemblance to a Smucker's jar with the label soaked off.

Knowing that Aunt Vickie had recently returned from a senior citizen's trip to Atlantic City, I was pleased just to be remembered.

If your house is as frazzled as our house is, you will certainly appreciate these hints for surviving the holidays. It's way too late to take advantage of catalogs this year, but if you ask your co-workers, neighbors and relatives about the catalogs they receive, you can get the addresses and get on mailing lists for next year.

Everything from Asian avocados to holiday zucchini bread is available in one form or another from a catalog.

Food gifts

Personal favorites are the "Mo Ho! Ho! The Betta" (for great condiments) and, of course, Williams Sonoma for those who like to dream of a Martha Stewart-type kitchen.

For last-minute shopping, holiday favorites are Raphael Spice and J.R. Hirt's at the Eastern Market in Detroit. If you've never been there, you gotta go. It is a trip. The factory sensation offers a couple of pint jars and a gallon of plain vinegar from Raphael's and stick in some fresh garlic cloves or a sprig of dried herbs, and you have a gourmet gift. Julia Child would appreciate.

Hirt's has baskets that you can fill with mustards, oils, vinegars, coffees, candies, cheeses, meats, specialty foods and gadgets. Check out Hirt's third floor for baskets as gift items. Service is always with a smile, and they are both open Monday through Saturday, but if you enjoy the hustle and bustle, Saturday mornings are an adventure in people watching.

Not trying to steal the thunder from dearly departed Aunt Vickie, but if you have a favorite recipe for pumpkin bread, nut bread, fruitcake or whatever, you can bake a batch in sterilized Mason jars for an easy gourmet gift or take-along.

Nut breads

If you use the one-pint Mason jars, simply wash, dry and then fill them with one level cup of batter and place them in the center of the oven. Bake and bake for 35-40 minutes, depending on your recipe. About 10 minutes before the cakes are done, bring a saucupan of water to a boil and put in the jars lids. Cover and remove from heat and keep in hot water until ready to use. When cakes are done, remove jars from the oven and, if the rims need cleaning, use a clean moist paper towel. Carefully put lids and rings in place, then screw the tops shut.

Place jars on a wire rack and they will seal as they cool. You can figure on 5-7 jars per basic recipe. If Aunt Vickie were here, she'd probably use a box mix.

For those whose talents lie outside the kitchen, there are hundreds of recipes that need no cooking whatsoever. Bourbon Balls are a personal favorite and can be made weeks in advance. They get better with age, as long as they're stored in an airtight container.

If you can melt a chocolate bar, you can dip in apple slices, cookies, pineapple chunks, Rice Krispy treats and anything else sweet and luscious.

Dipping spoons are available at Kitchen Glamour and other baking supply stores, but you can use your fingers and simply allow the chocolate to drip from a wire rack until firm. No fair licking in between dips.

See Larry James's family-tested recipes inside. To leave a message for Chef Larry, dial 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, then mailbox number 1866.C

LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

- Pamper your pets during the holidays with homemade dog biscuits and other goodies.
- Gift ideas for wine lovers.



Making dinner: George Dragitsis and his children, Marie, 10, Louis, 13, and Annie, 5 work together to make dinner. George watches as Louis slices a tomato.

CHEF MAKES COOKING A FAMILY EVENT



Cooking is an avocation and a love for executive chef George Dragitsis. At home he makes cooking a family event, and is teaching his children to cook.

BY SANDRA DALKA-PRYSDY
SPECIAL WRITER

Who knew? If George Dragitsis's father hadn't been responsible for the cooking operations at a U.S. Army officer's club in Germany, maybe George wouldn't be an executive chef today. And, maybe if he didn't help his father in the club's kitchen on weekends while he was a teenager, he wouldn't be Group Director of DulsSeafood Operations, Michigan Group (Farmer Jack and A&P Divisions) Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company.

"Soon after I started helping out at the officer's club, I discovered that I

not only liked preparing food, but I was good at it!" said the Beverly Hills resident.

When the Dragitsis family returned to the states and settled in Detroit, George began his successful climb in the food preparation business, starting as an apprentice chef at the Golden Mushroom in Southfield, and at the Poncehain Hotel in downtown Detroit.

In 1974, Dragitsis graduated from the prestigious Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York. For the next decade he assumed a number of sous chef and chef positions at restaurants in metro Detroit area, and at restaurants in other parts of the country.

"I had the opportunity to work with and learn from good people, and at the best places in town," Dragitsis said. "Although I felt extremely lucky, preparing food was not enough for me. I wanted to continue my education, and at the same time, share my enjoyment of food with others.

Dragitsis went on to accomplish both of these goals. He earned a bachelor's degree in hospitality management at Florida International University in Miami, and was a food and beverage management instructor at the University of Houston's Conrad

N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management program. While in Texas, he earned a master's degree in business management from the University of St. Thomas.

Although his current administrative tasks took him from the kitchen to the front office, Dragitsis continued his chef studies, and earned his Certified Executive Chef rating from the American Culinary Federation in 1991, became a Certified Culinary Educator.

"Although my first love is cooking, I enjoy being in charge of a major food operation because it gives me the opportunity to be involved in all aspects of food preparation and distribution. In this position I know firsthand what the general public wants and needs and what lifestyle changes are popular.

"Consumers are more health-conscious and, although deli is still popular, our customers are demanding more low-fat products," he said.

Dragitsis and his wife, Michelle have three children. He is also health conscious when it concerns his family. He is teaching his children to cook well-balanced meals.

"We consider cooking a family event, and we try to make a meal together at least twice a week," he said. "We try different things so that the

kids can acquire a good palate. And we make healthy things that taste good."

He added that his family rarely gets sick and believes that this is due to the healthy foods they make in the home. "We make lots of our own soup, from scratch. I stay away from canned goods."

Here are some of his tips for healthy family cooking:

- We eat all kinds of meat, but I always look for the lean pieces whether it's pork or beef - the medallion pieces that don't contain a high amount of fat. We also eat a lot of seafood.
- How you prepare your food is almost as important as what the food is if you want to serve healthy meals. That is why I grill the meat most of the time.
- We cook with lots of fresh vegetables. They're not only good, but preparing vegetables is a good task for the children.

Dragitsis said his "Chef's Secret" is he looks for uncomplicated recipes, and plans ahead. "I get out everything I need, which usually isn't a lot," he said. "Some people think you need a lot of gadgets to be a good cook. That's not true. All you usually need is a good, sharp knife, a cutting board, and good pots and pans."

See recipe inside.

Simplify party plans to be with guests

BY ELEANOR & RAY HEALD
SPECIAL WRITERS

"Holiday parties should not add stress to an already busy lifestyle," said hair stylist Gordon Doyon, who takes great pride in his profession and simplified party preparations.

Doyon is partners with his brother Gene in Doyon Brothers Salon in Birmingham.

"I enjoy hair styling because it makes people look good," he said. "When people look good, they feel good. A hair style needs to match the lifestyle and personality of the individual.

"I believe it's the same with entertaining. Busy professionals want and perhaps need to entertain, but business demands require simplification of party plans. The whole point of a party is getting together with people you enjoy. It's not pleasurable if a person spends six hours preparing and only two hours with friends. The timeline should be reversed."

Doyon cooked at home when he was growing up. His mom was a basic cook who served blended meals to her large family. "When mom made goatlah, it was basic," he said. "She'd ask me to get it ready when I got home from school. That's when I'd go to work in the spice cabinet and start doctoring her recipe." At age 16, Doyon gave his first sit-down dinner for 28 guests.

From opening punch preparations through finger foods, salads and cold pastas, Doyon keeps it simple and offers the following suggestions:

"I prepare all the ingredients in advance and

store them in resealable bags to maintain freshness. I do this whether I'm entertaining at home or I'm taking a dish to someone's house. Even if the host doesn't ask friends to bring a dish.

"I usually feel more comfortable when I take one. I inquire if a buffet table is planned and prepare a simple Tex Mex or something like kosher salami with apricot sauce."

Doyon takes the salami with apricot sauce from the oven just before leaving for a party and says it stays sufficiently warm on a table.

Doyon also makes use of prepared foods rather than making everything from scratch. "Cherry tomatoes stuffed with tabouli are festive for the Christmas holidays and appeal to vegetarians." He buys the tabouli from Anita's Kitchen in Troy.

"I use the resealable bags again if I'm serving a cheese spread. If you fill the bag with the spread, then cut off a corner at serving time, the plastic bag doubles as a party bag for easy piping of the spread."

While Doyon epitomizes a busy professional who cooks, we consulted two professionals who party plan for a living. Barbara Obert and Mariene Szczodrowski are partners in The Iceing And Butter Sloope, Catering Too! in Redford.

Although their specialty is wedding cakes, they enter a long list of appetizers, complete lunches and dinners. "We try to keep food preparations simple," Obert said.

"We frequently prep from scratch on site at a client's home, so simplicity is essential. Caterers focus on design and presentation. The home cook often forgets this."



STEPHEN CANTRELL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Easy appetizers: Gordon Doyon puts finishing touches on a platter of stuffed cherry tomatoes with tabouli and roast beef roll-ups with mustard sauce.

Simple food displayed well is the key. "Paper doilies add a lot. Always use them," said Obert. "For the holidays, place a doily on the table and use a footed cake dish in the middle to showcase the dessert.

"If you don't have a file system started, begin one this holiday season. Know where you can buy a holiday tort.

See SIMPLIFY, 2B