

TASTE

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MONDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 1994

TASTE BUDS



CHEF LARRY JANES

Thanks for memories, Mr. Gingerbread Man

If I had to guess, I would guess that just about everybody loves gingerbread. Ask any of your gourmet-type friends, and more than likely they will tell you they do. My guess is that they will also tell you their favorite kind of gingerbread, who used to bake it, how it was made and where they ate it. Gingerbread is a holiday favorite that fills the air with wisps of ginger, molasses and nutmeg. It is also a comfort food that warms the soul, the mind and hearts of young and old alike. In the Janes Gang family tree, different women made different types of gingerbread. Momma would only bake old fashioned gingerbread in her heirloom 8- by 8-inch square pan. We'd usually enjoy it with a big dollop of Cool Whip immediately following Sunday dinner. Any leftovers would be eaten by dad with his ritual morning pot of coffee.

Raisin eyes, nut noses

Aunt Phyllis, on the other hand, was the proverbial gingerbread people creator. Her early-American decorated home would have a multitude of gingerbread families adorning the Christmas tree. Plates of gingerbread men, women and children would be graced with raisins for eyes, nuts for noses and dots of frosting for buttons and dresses. Aunt Edna was known for a gingerbread layer cake that could have won a prize for good looks at the Pillsbury Bake-Off. Momma said it was too bad she always overcooked it because, "Aunt Edna was well past 80 years, she had a hard time seeing the dials on the stove, but it was still good drenched in a hard whiskey sauce." Stories, in the end, are the stuff of memories, and I like to think that when you make one of these gingerbread maven's recipes, you'll be providing loved ones with a few new stories and some delicious memories.

Royal pedigree

Gingerbread and its making is steeped in history. Queen Elizabeth I supposedly invented the gingerbread man while playing with her gingerbread. Of course, where would we be without the story of Hansel and Gretel and the gingerbread house that turned out to be the witch's den? In her first edition of "The Boston Cooking School Cookbook," Fanny Merril Farmer featured five different recipes for gingerbread. She wrote: "Gingerbreads vary from the simplest eggless mixture made with hot water, to a rich and buttery sour cream concoction which makes no pretense of being inexpensive." Surprisingly, Ms. Farmer chose not to incorporate gingerbread people because "that was a craft item whereas good gingerbread is best served warm as a luncheon bread or with afternoon tea." As with just about any other great recipe, the best gingerbreads are made with the best ingredients. In her book, "Entertaining On The Run" (William Morrow, 1994, \$25), author Marlene Sorosky suggests that the best gingerbread is made with the freshest spices. Fresh ground cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger are a must, especially when most of us have spices older than the cars we drive. Ground spices lose 10-15 percent of their potency every year, especially when exposed to air and humidity.

If you use fresh cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger, the dish will be 50 percent more aromatic and tasty. Simply grate these fresh, whole spices on the finest side of your hand grater/shredder. You can also expect better results when using pastry or cake flour, rather than all-purpose flour. Cake flour is usually triple sifted and certainly is not a prerequisite for making great cookies, but it does make a difference when baking cakes and pastries. The folks at General Mills, makers of the Softasilk brand of cake flour, claim their product is milled with a smaller grind and has a lower protein level for more tenderness. Heavy bleaching of the flour also helps break down the gluten and allows for better distribution of the fats and therefore better moisture retention. Personally speaking, I get excellent results when preparing gingerbread by using a heavy, commercial-grade bakeware or oven-proof glass. Aluminum tins and pie plates have a tendency to brown the bottom crust and make a drier product.

LOOKING AHEAD

- What to watch for in Taste next week
- Local chefs reveal what's on their Christmas wish lists
- Holiday gifts for wine aficionados



STAFF PHOTOS BY DAN DEAN

Bring in the holiday season on a healthy note



Seasonal Treats: Ajluni and her son, Steven, await their guests. Lemon Pepper Mushrooms with pita chips are a family favorite.

**BY SANDRA DALKA-PRYBYL
SPECIAL WRITER**

Samar Ajluni has several good reasons for serving healthy foods when she's entertaining. She's married to cardiologist Steve Ajluni. She has an 11-month-old son, Steven, and she is expecting a second child in March. For years she's been an active member of the American Heart Association's Michigan affiliate and is currently working on the group's Heart Beat in February. Ajluni is among the many area

hosts and hostesses who will be serving their guests good and healthy food during the holidays. "I not only feel that I have a responsibility to serve my family and guests good, nutritious fare, but I also like low-fat and low-calorie, heart-healthy foods," Ajluni said. "Nutritious foods make me feel better and give me more energy. In addition, with today's emphasis on being fit, prepared, healthy

See HOLIDAYS, 2B

Round up kids for jolly afternoon of baking



QUAKER OATS

Holiday magic: A cookie decorating party is lots of fun for kids of all ages.

An afternoon of cookie baking and decorating can be a terrific creative outlet for kids. It also has all the makings of a holiday party. At least one organization is key to ensuring peace and goodwill, especially if you've invited a mixed-age crowd. Let the older kids take over the kitchen and bake while the younger ones turn the family room into Santa's workshop and decorate grown-up Santa's helper should be in each location to supervise and lend a hand if needed. Little decorators will have lots of fun "dressing" the "Chocolate Teddy Bear Cookies," a recipe created by the Quaker Oats Company. The ready-to-spread frosting you can buy in the supermarket is great glue for small can-dies, and it can be used to make mittens, ties, shoes, and other accessories. Give each child a small plastic knife for safe spreading. Muffin tins or small unbreakable bowls will keep candies and sprinkles organized and easy to use. Put the bakers to work mixing the dough for "Kris Kringle Shortbread." What makes this cookie such a snap is the mixing method. The ingredients are measured into a large resealable plastic bag, then squeezed and kneaded into a smooth dough. To shape, pinch off small pieces of dough and drop on the cookie sheet. Or, for more evenly shaped cookies, roll dough into balls. Using two fingers or the tines of a



- fork, flatten cookies then decorate with colored sugar, sprinkles or other small holiday candies and bake.
- Tied with ribbon and a small ornament, they'll be sweet remembrance of a magical afternoon.
- Here are some more "Kids in the Kitchen," cookie baking tips from the folks who make Sun Maid Baking Raisins.
- Get ready to bake - select the recipe you want to bake. Discuss the baking project with mom, dad or an adult helper.
- Keep several thick potholders handy.
- Read the recipe entirely before beginning, making sure you understand the instructions.
- Review the list of ingredients to make certain you have everything on hand. Gather all of the ingredients on the kitchen counter or table.
- Assemble all of the kitchen utensils and any other items you will need.
- As you add each ingredient, put it back in its correct place. That way, you won't be confused about whether or not the ingredient has been added.
- Clean up spills as you go along.
- See recipes inside.