

Bake up lots of presents

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Sure, there will be the proverbial Hudson's box filled with homemade cookies but in addition the box will be decorated and tied together with a batch of unbaked cookie dough, a roll of kitchen parchment for baking, a favorite cookie cutter and, last but not least, a recipe for all of the above. Do the cookie dough up in one of those burpable containers that can double later on in the year for a lunch transporter.

Way back when yours truly was in college, I remember Momma sending me an early holiday treat. Upon returning to my dorm after a day of classes, I was greeted with a box sent by the mail that, upon opening, turned out to be a coffee pot Momma had purchased at a neighbor's garage sale for \$3.

Knowing my addiction for coffee, there was a small bag of coffee, and the pot was stuffed with a favorite batch of chocolate chip cookies. Within 10 minutes I was savoring a pot of hot coffee and a few cookies that really made me remember and appreciate those "little things" others do for us.

It doesn't have to be a gift of gold to be a gift from the heart. To this day, I still have that coffee pot and I'll always remember the good feelings associated with it.

ENOUGH OF NOSTALGIA. If you're thinking about sending out a batch of holiday cookies, better get in gear real fast to ensure delivery before the big day. Anyone who has ever mailed holiday treats always goes through a certain amount of trepidation wondering if the package will make it through without ending up a batch of crumb and munch.

Sure, you pack cookies tightly in

coffee cans and burpable containers but the least expensive way is to pack the holiday treats in popped popcorn. Not only will you save money on the postage (those cans can be heavy) but the popcorn will act as a moisture inhibitor and a cushion that as light as air.

There are few of us who can organize our lives in such order that the house is cleaned, the cookies baked, the shopping done and the gifts wrapped before December 1. If you happen to have made a batch of cookies ahead of schedule (tell me how you do it) and they are secure in the freezer, you can always reheat them. Place frozen baked cookies and confectionery treats unwrapped on a plain cookie sheet and heat for 2-3 minutes at 350 degrees to restore crispness.

The microwave might be great for other goodies but heating and defrosting cookies requires a slower, drier heat. Since cookies contain a high amount of fat, microwaving will create a disaster.

IT'S TRUE THAT research shows fruitcakes are the most-not-wanted items at Christmastime. Even ties and hankies are more appreciated than a fruitcake. But that survey must never have questioned the recipients of Momma's famed brandy-soaked fruitcake.

Every year for the last 35 years, Momma has always spent three days engulfed in the kitchen preparing her fruitcake. The mailman, the dentist, the doctor, her favorite cashier at the grocery and all of us kids are beneficiaries of her labor.

She starts with a trip to the Eastern Market for five-pound sacks of dried apricots, candied cherries, candied lemon peel and citron. Even with a Cuisinart sitting on the coun-

ter, she chooses to cut up all the fruits and nuts by hand. "To ensure they're all the same size."

She will spend a day doing the nuts and fruit alone. The next day is spent lining the dozen or so loaf pans with greased waxed paper and the preparation of the dry batter. The third day is spent finishing the batter and doing the baking.

Since her fruitcakes take almost three hours to bake, Momma starts at dawn and works till dusk. I don't really think Dad minds having breakfast at Dunkin' Donuts and dinner at Ponderosa. But after the baking, Momma will begin the seven-day ritual of basting the freshly baked loaves with brandy soaked in a clean dish towel.

ANYONE LUCKY enough to be the benefactor of one of her fruitcakes will appreciate the taste and effort for a long time. And with all due respect to the mail-order fruitcake fantasizers, there is no comparison! This story is accompanied by a recipe for Momma's fruitcake that will surely please any recipient, and even though it takes a while to make, it's worth it!

Last but not least, let's not forget all creatures big and small. Last year, I baked a batch of homemade doggie biscuits for the family vet. I picked up one of those empty gallon jars from a local restaurant and spent about 20 minutes tossing a mixture of beef drippings, flour and cornmeal and having a ball rolling them out with the kids and cutting them into Fido-sized biscuits. It was a great learning experience for the kids, and I think it helped them be a little more compassionate about animals and the animals' need to be treated extra special during this busy time of the year.

1 tablespoon grated orange rind
1/2 cup orange juice
1 cup grape jelly
1/2 cup shortening
2 1/2 cups brown sugar, firmly packed
5 eggs

Preheat oven to 300 degrees. Line 2 loaf pans with greased waxed paper. Set aside. Sift together flour, baking powder, salt, cinnamon, cloves. Set aside. Combine raisins with nuts and all candied fruit. Set aside. Beat orange rind with orange juice, jelly and mix well. Set aside. Beat shortening and sugar until creamy. Add eggs. Mix well. Add flour mixture alternately with orange mixture, beginning and ending with flour. Stir in candied fruit

mix. Turn batter into prepared pans. Bake 2 1/2 to 3 hours for loaf pans and test with tooth pick or tester for doneness. Cover with paper the last hour to prevent over browning on top. Cool. Remove from pan. Store in tightly covered container for 1 week to mellow flavors. During this time, the cake can be doused daily with a brandy or rum mixture for added moistness.

HOMEMADE DOGGIE BISCUITS
1 1/2 cups beef bouillon, hot
1 cup uncooked oatmeal
1/2 cup meat drippings
1/2 cup peanut or dry milk powder
1/2 cup cornmeal

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