

MONDAY, DECEMBER 11, 1995

TASTE BUDS



CHEF LARRY JAMES

Build a pretty house made of gingerbread

I have fond memories of gingerbread houses never graced the top of our Zenith console television. It was Grandma James, who passed on before my 10th birthday, who always seemed to know when our family was coming to visit. Minutes before we entered her home she would pull a pan of steaming gingerbread from the oven. I can remember Grandma James uttering something about gingerbread as a medicinal that "relieves respiratory difficulties and strengthens weak stomachs."

The best thing about gingerbread is the sharing. People create gingerbread houses to make other people smile.

Pasty chef Mary Denning of the same named cake shop in Westland has been an avid gingerbread baker since learning the trade in culinary school.

"Memorable gingerbread houses are made with imagination and patience, not with expensive equipment," said Denning, who was preparing to teach a class in gingerbread house construction at Henry Ford Community College in Dearborn.

"Some of the houses are very elaborate and can be made with white chocolate, pulled sugar and fancy decorations, but I tend to appreciate the more simplistic homes and winter scenes."

"I've seen castles and cathedrals made out of gingerbread but the novice baker should remember to have fun and most of all, be patient," said Denning who has taught students how to erect everything from simple houses to complex villages.

Gingerbread house construction need not be a labor nor a major expense. There are a number of gingerbread books on the market with the most respected being "The Gingerbread Book" by Allen Bragdon, (copyright 1995, Smithsonian Publishers, \$16.95.) You can also pick up any holiday issue of a family or women's magazine. Most will have recipes for a construction grade gingerbread (a little denser with less leavening than standard cake like gingerbread) and will also include cut-outs for a basic frame.

Make the gingerbread and allow it to chill for at least an hour while you trace out the frame on shirt box cardboard. I find it incredibly easy to roll out the chilled dough, and pre-cut the forms, then bake on parchment lined baking sheets.

For the most simplistic of designs, figure on a front, back, two sides (with windows) and two roof sections. Architecturally inclined bakers may wish to add dormers, porches, gabled roofs, chimneys and even weather vanes.

If all that sounds confusing, you can skip the making of the gingerbread and use graham crackers which can be carefully cut and trimmed.

"You can even get the youngest involved using sugar cubes as a construction medium," said Jeanne Sarna of Troy who teaches children's cooking at all Kitchen Glamour locations.

Sarna, a certified home economist, has encouraged both her sons Tony and Jeff to be creative in the kitchen.

"When the boys were younger, we'd spend an entire afternoon baking the gingerbread and then spend the entire next day constructing our houses. Sure, we had crumbs and frosting all over the kitchen but the opportunity to spend some quality time creating a family holiday treasure was far more important than worrying about who or what was going to clean up."

While making a gingerbread house Sarna said the boys learned how to use a pastry bag and what different tips could do for the decorating.

Once the gingerbread has been made and cut and a design has been agreed upon, the next step is to procure a large variety of confections to decorate with. You'll also have to whip up a batch of Royal icing (also dubbed gingerbread glue by the pros), buy a pastry bag or two, some couplers, and about \$1.99 worth of assorted tips for decorating.

Most kitchen shops sell a pastry bag kit that contains a small reusable pastry bag, couplers and three assorted tips, but price out the individual purchases as sometimes, a dollar or two can be saved.

Making gingerbread houses is fun. All you need is patience and imagination, not necessarily in that order.

See Larry James' family-tested recipes inside. Chef Larry is a free-lance writer for The Observer & Economist Newspapers. To leave a voice mail message for him dial (313) 653-3647 on a touch-tone phone, then mailbox number 1595.

LOOKING AHEAD

Want to watch for in Taste next week:

- Holiday recipes
- Wine gift ideas

TASTE

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Surprise Santa with a special snack

BY RENEE M. SKOGLUND
SPECIAL WRITER

his Christmas Eve, good little boys and girls everywhere will leave a special snack for Santa. They know that climbing up and down chimneys with a big sack of toys slung across your back is hard work. Santa can get mighty hungry.

When I was a little girl, I used to leave Santa a bologna sandwich and a bottle of beer. My friend Alyce left him some sliced pepperoni and a bottle of beer. Strange that our fathers loved those same snacks. Of course, we also took care of Santa's sweet tooth and left him a few cookies.

Gretchen Heinon of Canton makes Santa thumbprint cookies on Christmas Eve afternoon, as did her mother and grandmother before her.

"We have a tradition that my mother, Joan, did. Her mother, my grandmother, Sue did it. I remember these from my childhood. I have the handprinted recipe from Grandma Sue," she said.

"I have memories of those specific cookies. Rolling them in egg whites and the bits sticking to your fingers. Getting to lick your fingers. Definitely have sticky fingers in this house."

Besides Gretchen, the sticky fingers belong to 8-year-old Ashley, 5-year-old Katie, and Nicholas, who will be 2 on Dec. 18. Husband Mike is the only one with clean fingers on Christmas Eve. "He's not a sweet-eater," said Gretchen.

After returning home from Christmas Eve services, the Heinon children place the cookies on a special "Santa" plate Gretchen had as a child and set the place on the fireplace. They include a glass of milk to wash the crumbs down and a carrot for Rudolph.

"That's just part of preparing for bed on Christmas Eve," part of the tradition. "I'm looking forward to Nicholas's participation this year," said Gretchen.

Susan Heinbaugh of Plymouth and her daughter Allison, 7, plan on making Santa bread pudding this Christmas Eve. "It's so basic. Everybody has old bread around. Allison really does it all," said Susan.

Besides, the quick and easy recipe allows time for other family activities. The Heinbaughs are a blended family, and Christmas Eve is an opportunity for everyone to come together. "We have children all ages. We go from 2 1/2 to 7. Only Allison is at home, but the others do find their way home on Christmas Eve. They know there will be a fire in the fireplace and Sandy Patti will be playing on the radio," said Susan.

The bread pudding recipe comes from Susan's mother-in-law, a Pennsylvania Dutch woman whose family still butchers their own hogs for hams and sausage. The pudding is simple and delicious, with just a hint of spice. Santa's sure to love it. "Our Santa happens to look a lot like Daddy," said Susan.

The Rick and Yvonne Johnson family of Redford celebrates Christmas Eve as if it were a birthday party. All four of their children, ages 14 to two, participate by decorating the bathroom mirror, the family's unofficial bulletin board.

"We'll decorate the bathroom mirror with 'Happy Birthday Jesus.' We'll all add little notes. We'll put balloons around the mirror. It's a huge mirror and that's where everybody goes. That's where all the family birthday messages go," said Yvonne.

Besides a birthday cake for Jesus, Yvonne makes cocoa mounds for Santa's snack. "They're everybody's favorite cookie, especially Santa's. 'Ho ho ho. He loves chocolate,'" she said.

This year, Angelina, two, is looking forward to helping her mother make the cookies. "She keeps saying 'me make cookies mama,'" said Yvonne.

On Christmas morning, besides a plate of crumbs, Santa leaves each Johnson child a letter listing things they have done over the year that he's proud of and sometimes making suggestions for improvement. They're usually words to live by. Not a bad exchange for a Santa snack.

• See recipes inside.

Santa's surprise: Light up your Christmas tree with dozens of cookies lovingly baked and decorated by your kids. They'll love all the festive shapes they can make with Christmas Cookie Ornaments, a crisp oatmeal sugar cookie that's easy to shape and delicious to eat.

Stock-up on gourmet goodies for guests

BY DAWN NEEDHAM
SPECIAL WRITER

Figuring out what to cook for dinner or what to serve at a gathering often moves to the bottom of the list at this time of year, pushed behind finding the perfect office exchange gift and the obligatory cookie-baking session.

But with just a little preparation and a well-stocked pantry, entertaining unexpected guests or making a last-minute dish can be as easy as well, sending a list to Santa and having all the gifts delivered.

There are so many good products on the market one may plan an entire party menu comprised of all premade items. But at this time of year, homemade delights for a lot and doesn't call for a huge amount of effort.

Juliette Jonna, who runs Juliette's Cuisine, a division of Merchant of Vino, has the luxury of all those premade dips, appetizers, side and main dishes that the market sells. But by use of her best ideas come from combining items from the store's shelves with a little bit of effort to come up with great treats and snacks.

By using ready-made gourmet products, she said, "it's fast and it looks like you spent half a day on it."

Roasted red peppers, in a jar or made yourself and stored, can be a lifesaver to hurried cooks. Jonna suggests serving them on an antipasto platter with small buffalo mozzarella balls, some pickles olives and Parmesan cheese. For another idea, layer mozzarella slices on a serving platter with some roasted peppers and sliced tomato, add sprigs of fresh basil and perhaps drizzle a good olive oil over the lot.

Olives are the "hottest thing right now," Jonna said. She attributes this to the rise in interest in Mediterranean cuisine (helped along by its reputed heart-healthy attributes). A "mosaic of olives" with different colors, sizes and flavors can be matched with cocktails, wine or beer for a post-dinnering refreshment or a pre-event warm-up.

And for cocktail snacks, forget the old rules about what drinks go with what food. "Everything is so versatile, like the way we dress today," Jonna said. "There's not one format of dressing, like if you go to a cocktail party everybody's dressing differently, not the same like they used to. Food's the same way."

When using gourmet products, you may find that the adage "you get what you pay for" holds true. Some may seem expensive, but compare the cost of a few good items — goat



Gourmet goodie: Christmas log, created by pastry chefs Michel and Sam Daher at Sweet Dreams in Bloomfield Hills, tastes delicious and is a work of art.

cheese, roasted peppers, an excellent loaf of bread — with a recipe containing a dozen items. Keep in mind the price of your time and changing tastes. "People would rather eat high quality than high volume," Jonna said.

Think easy and fun, too. Invite some friends over to taste a variety of microbrewed beers.

Serve snack foods such as honey mustard pretzels, Cajun peanuts,

chili-lime tortilla chips.

Master chef Kevin Gawronski, an instructor at the Schoolcraft College School of Culinary Arts in Livonia, said his freezer is his salvation. "I always have some smoked salmon in my freezer, and it just takes a few minutes to thaw and slice and serve with some French bread," he said.

A freezer stocked with some inter-

See GOODIES, inside