

Susan
Nye

Around
the Table

T'was the Night before ...

Holiday2006/volume 14

Coming soon:
The Winter-Spring
Cooking Party Schedule

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There is a striking and uncanny similarity between the frenzied preparations made just before a hurricane and Christmas Eve. The larder is stuffed. The pharmacies and discount stores are cleaned out of batteries. Do-it-Yourself capabilities are stretched to the limit; not mounting plywood to protect windows but assembling bicycles and doll houses.

Small children imitate a meteorological phenomenon of their own by turning into tornadoes of frantic energy. As it gets closer to Christmas, the level of excitement grows and anything approaching standard house rules flies up the chimney. Sofas become trampolines and launching pads for little ones as they leap their way through the day. When I was growing up on Jackson Road, the PTA recruited a band of Santa's helpers every Christmas Eve to tour the neighborhood and make a final check to confirm the naughty and nice list. These red suited assistants also delivered a gift to every child. With excitement already at a fevered pitch, these visits did nothing to bring calm to the neighborhood.

I recently had a taste of the frenzied excitement to come when my nieces came to visit for the weekend. We got into the spirit of the season by decking my halls. First, the girlies helped me pick out a Christmas tree. Then we pulled out the boxes of decorations and pandemonium ensued. Kaela wrapped the tree in lights while Emily and Charlotte wrapped themselves in tree skirts and decorated their heads with Santa and Elf hats. Thanks to their help the house smells of pine and is filled with greenery, Santas, snowmen, nutcrackers, bells and baubles.

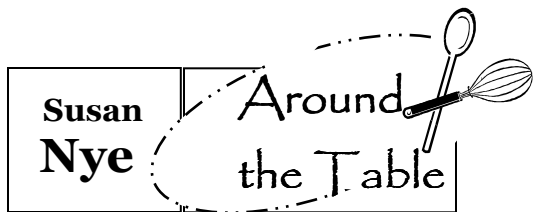
Even though the girls helped put a big dent in my preparations, I am sure that, Christmas Eve will be packed with last minute chores and errands. Every year I promise myself I will wrap my presents sooner rather than later. But on the 24th I inevitably find myself surrounded by unwrapped gifts, paper, ribbon and tape. And no matter how well organized I think I have been, there is always at least two or three unavoidable trips to town for cards or stocking stuffers.

There are also the final culinary preparations for Christmas. Many families have special dishes that only come out in late December. At the Nye's, our Christmas menus continue to change and evolve to accommodate crazy, busy schedules, vegetarians and a lot of whim and whimsy. I am a big part of that whim and whimsy.

I began volunteering for Christmas dessert duty when I was in high school. I was studying French and I decided we needed a Bûche de Noel. A Bûche de Noel is similar to a jelly roll except that it is loaded up with butter cream icing and decorated to look like a Yule log. I found a recipe in Ladies' Home Journal or McCall's or one of those pre-Martha ladies' magazines. The cake takes a bit of time but is not difficult to make. The final product, or at least the version I made, is very sweet and within a few years, I became concerned that my family would go into sugar shock. Plus whim and whimsy took hold and an ever changing variety of tasty treats have found their way in and out of my oven. I generally take requests and the quickest, loudest voices generally decide for all of us. In the past few years, there has been a definite leaning towards -anything, as long as it is chocolate.

Whether you stick to the tried and true or experiment with new treats, I wish you a warm and wonderful holiday and,

Bon appétit! ~ Susan



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Peppermint Bark Cookies

Makes 5 dozen

2 cups all-purpose flour
1/3 cup unsweetened Dutch-process cocoa powder
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
2 sticks (1 cup) unsalted butter, softened
1/2 cup granulated sugar
1 large egg
1 teaspoon vanilla
4 oz fine-quality semisweet or bittersweet chocolate (not unsweetened), finely chopped
White Chocolate Ganache (recipe follows)
4 oz peppermint sticks, crushed

1. Whisk together flour, cocoa, baking powder, and salt in a bowl until combined. Stir in chopped chocolate.
2. Beat together butter and granulated sugar in a large bowl with an electric mixer at medium-high speed until pale and fluffy, about 2 minutes in a stand mixer (preferably fitted with paddle attachment) or 4 minutes with a handheld. Add egg and vanilla, beat until combined. Reduce speed to low, then add flour mixture and combine well. Cover bowl with plastic wrap and chill dough until firm, about 30 minutes.
3. Put oven racks in the center of the oven; preheat oven to 325°F.
4. Roll 1 scant tablespoon of dough into a 1-inch ball; flatten slightly with palm of your hand. Arrange cookies 2 inches apart on un-greased baking sheets.
5. Bake cookies, switching position of sheets halfway through baking, until they puff up, 8 to 10 minutes total. Transfer to racks to cool completely.
6. Frost with White Chocolate Ganache and sprinkle with crushed peppermint.

Cookies keep, layered between sheets of wax paper or parchment, in an airtight container at room temperature 1 week.

White Chocolate Ganache

6 ounces white chocolate
2 tablespoons butter
3 tablespoons heavy cream
4 tablespoons sifted confectioner's sugar

1. Melt the chocolate and butter in a heavy sauce pan over low. Stir in cream and confectioner's sugar. Let cool for a few minutes before frosting cookies.

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