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As far as I can figure there are ten official holidays in the United States. That's when the post office and banks close their doors. But really, that's just the tip of the iceberg. Depending on your point of view there are scores, even hundreds more. Almost everyday's a holiday if you observe the likes of Bubble Bath Day and Fibonacci Day. (Perhaps only columnists desperately looking for inspiration pay much attention to these last two and others like them.)

Somewhere between the paltry ten and the daily excuses for celebrations are what I fondly call the Cupcake Holidays. You should remember them from your days in elementary school. Hopefully you don't refer to them as B-list celebrations because they are definitely red carpet worthy. Businesses more or less plug along as usual. Schools are still in session but forget the milk and graham crackers at snack time. Instead, someone's mother waltzes in around 9:30 with a box of gaily decorated cupcakes for a sweet break between reading and arithmetic. Or at least they did when I was in elementary school.

Someone's mom, never mine, always brought sweet treats on Valentine's Day and Saint Patrick's Day. The First of May sometimes made the cut but it was graham crackers as usual on Sadie Hawkins Day. Same held true for Ground Hog Day, Flag Day and United Nations Day.

But the top of the heap, the cupcake day to beat all cupcake days has got to be Halloween. Truth be told, I can't understand why Halloween doesn't have equal status with Labor Day and the 4th of July. It's certainly in my top five favorite holidays. In spite of my fervent support, it doesn't look like Halloween will be declared a national or state holiday anytime soon.

However, Halloween is more than the perfect excuse for a cupcake, much more. Costumes and a parade are definitely in order. As a little girl, one of my favorite games was dress-up. Then and now, I adore costumes, especially when boas or capes are involved. Perhaps I was Batgirl or Wonder Woman in another life. Halloween is a wonderful excuse to play dress-up. Throughout my childhood, I paraded through school hallways and neighborhood streets as a pumpkin and a princess, a witch, a devil, a hobo, a football player and a fine young cannibal. (This year I'm going as my all time favorite, a witch.)



So if Halloween fun is not on the agenda or in the syllabus, well it should be. This spooktacular holiday is more than merry-making. Halloween gets everyone's imaginations going and creative juices flowing. Surely arithmetic, spelling and reading can be put on hold for one day. Don't all kids deserve a chance to experiment and try a little mask making, pumpkin carving, storytelling and parading? Naturally these creative efforts should be rewarded with a cupcake. After all, whoever heard of a Cupcake Holiday without cupcakes?

I hope that you have a happy, healthy and fun Halloween; with or (heaven forbid) without cupcakes.

Bon appétit!

Susan

Gingerbread Cupcakes with Apple-Cranberry Compote & Ginger Crème Anglais

Homey gingerbread cupcakes take on a touch of elegance when served with a creamy ginger sauce and seasonal fruit. (The cupcakes are also yummy with cream cheese frosting. Don't forget to tint the frosting orange for Halloween.) Enjoy!



Makes about 20 cupcakes

2 teaspoons baking soda
 2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
 1 tablespoon ginger
 1 1/2 teaspoons cinnamon
 1/2 teaspoon cloves
 1/4 teaspoon nutmeg
 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper (optional)
 1 teaspoon salt
 2 teaspoons baking powder
 Grated peel of 1 orange
 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter at room temperature
 2/3 cup packed brown sugar
 1 cup unsulphered molasses
 2 large eggs
 Confectioners' sugar (optional)

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Line muffin tins with paper liners and set aside.

Combine 1 cup boiling water with the baking soda; set aside.

In a large bowl, sift together the flour, spices, salt and baking powder. Add the grated orange peel, whisk to combine and set aside.

Using an electric mixer, cream the butter until light. Add the brown sugar and molasses and mix for 1 to 2 minutes. Beat in the eggs. Add the baking soda-water and flour mixture, set the mixer on low and combine.

Fill the paper liners about two-thirds full with batter. Bake the cupcakes until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean, about 20 minutes. Let the cupcakes cool a few minutes, transfer to a wire rack and cool completely.

To serve: put 1-2 tablespoons of Ginger Crème Anglais on each dessert plate. Peel the paper wrapper off each cupcake and set on the crème anglais. Add a dollop of Apple-Cranberry Compote, lightly dust with confectioners' sugar and serve.

Ginger Crème Anglais

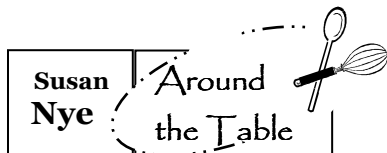
1 (2-inch) piece fresh ginger, peeled and chopped
 2 cups heavy cream
 1/3 cup brown sugar
 Pinch salt
 4 large egg yolks
 1 tablespoon pure vanilla extract

Put the ginger and cream into a small, heavy saucepan and set over low heat. Bring just to a simmer, stirring occasionally. Remove the pan from the heat and let steep, covered, for 30 minutes.

Fill a large bowl about half full with ice and water and set aside.

Pour the ginger-cream through a fine-mesh sieve into a bowl and discard the ginger. Add the brown sugar, salt and egg yolks to the cream and whisk until smooth and well combined. Transfer to a saucepan and heat over low heat, stirring constantly until it registers 170 degrees on a candy thermometer.

Pour the crème through a fine-mesh sieve into a small bowl. Set the bowl of crème into the large bowl with the ice water and cool. When the crème reaches room temperature, cover and store in the refrigerator.



Apple-Cranberry Compote

1 tablespoon butter (optional)
3-4 apples cored, peeled and chopped
1 cup cranberries
3/4 cup brown sugar
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon ginger
1/4 teaspoon nutmeg
1 cup cider
2 tablespoon calvados or apple jack (optional)
Pinch sea salt

Melt the butter in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add the apples, cranberries, sugar and spices and toss to combine.

Add the cider and calvados. Raise the heat to high and bring to a simmer. Reduce the heat to low and simmer for about 15 minutes or until the fruit is soft and starts to fall apart.

Can be made ahead. Cool to room temperature, cover and store in the refrigerator. Serve warm or at room temperature.