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You don't have to be a chef to cook up holiday food gifts

by Rick McDaniel, CITIZEN-TIMES CORRESPONDENT
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ASHEVILLE - 'Tis the season to be jolly, but if the number of people on the gift list outnumbers the amount of cash in the wallet, it can definitely lead to a blue Christmas.

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Don't despair - the answer can be as close as the kitchen.

You don't have to be a super chef to whip up these quick and easy food gifts. A trip to the "dollar store" for some glass jars and pretty ribbon will help make them even more festive for all the people on your gift list.

Ten-minute Never-fail Microwave Peanut Brittle

Serves: 16

1 cup sugar

1/2 cup light corn syrup

1 cup raw peanuts

1/8 teaspoon salt

1 tablespoon butter

1 teaspoon vanilla

1 teaspoon baking soda

Combine first 4 ingredients in 2-quart microwave mixing bowl. Microwave on HIGH for 8 minutes, stirring after 4 minutes. Add butter. Microwave on HIGH 2 minutes. Brittle should not get too brown. Stir in vanilla and soda until light and foamy. Spread on buttered baking sheet as thinly as possible. Cool. Break into pieces. Soak mixing bowl in warm sudsy water immediately for easier clean-up.

Source: <http://www.cdktichen.com/>

Russian Tea

2 1/2 cups Tang

1 1/2 cups white sugar

1 12 ounces instant lemonade mix

2 teaspoon cloves

1 1/2 cups instant lemon flavored tea

2 teaspoons cinnamon

1 teaspoon nutmeg

Measure out all ingredients first into separate bowls. Layer the Tang, sugar, lemonade and tea into jar as little or as much as you like. Repeat the layers often to make a pretty layered looking sand art type look. Add the cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg last. This is a very sweet drink.

Attach this to the jar:

Russian Tea

Mix dry ingredients well. Add 2 tablespoons into coffee cup and add hot water.

Source: <http://www.razzledazzlerecipes.com/>

Quick and easy fudge

2 cups sugar

2/3 cup evaporated milk

1/2 cup butter

12 large marshmallows

Pinch of salt

1 cup semisweet chocolate morsels

1 cup chopped pecans

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

In a heavy saucepan combine sugar, evaporated milk, butter, marshmallows and salt.

Cook the mixture over medium heat, stirring constantly.

Bring to a boil and continue stirring and cooking for 5 minutes, then remove from heat.

Stir in the chocolate morsels to the marshmallow mixture until completely melted. Continuing to stir the mixture add in the pecans and vanilla.

Pour the mixture in a buttered 8-inch square pan and allow to cool. Cut and serve. Makes 2 pounds

Source: Home Plate, Turner South

Spiced Pecans

These are addictive; a little sweet, a little salty, a little hot - the perfect snack.

1/4 pound butter

1/4 cup brown sugar, firmly packed

2 teaspoons salt

1 1/2 teaspoons cayenne pepper

2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce

1 pound pecan halves

In a 12-inch cast iron skillet over medium heat, melt butter.

Add brown sugar, salt, cayenne and Worcestershire sauce; whisk until well blended and sugar melts.

Add pecan halves and toss until well coated and heated through.

Place in a large paper bag and shake to drain; allow to cool on a cookie sheet.

Source: <http://www.chefrick.com/>

Hot Chocolate Mix

One is never too old to enjoy hot chocolate, and this is a special way to share it with a friend.

3 cups powdered milk

1/2 cup cocoa

3/4 cup sugar

Dash of salt

Sift the ingredients into a large bowl. Pack the mix into an airtight container.

Print this portion of the recipe on a nice recipe card and attach to the jar:

Hot Chocolate

Serves 1

4 tablespoons Hot Chocolate Mix

8 ounces boiling water

Marshmallows or whipped cream

Place the Hot Chocolate Mix into a mug. Pour in the boiling water. Stir until the Chocolate mix is dissolved. Garnish with marshmallows or whipped cream.

Source: www.geocities.com/giftsinajar

Chocolate Peanut Clusters

1/2 cup milk chocolate chips

1/2 cup semisweet chocolate chips

1 tablespoon shortening

1 cup roasted peanuts, unsalted

In small microwave-safe bowl, place milk, both chocolate chips, and shortening. Microwave at HIGH 1 to 1-1/2 minutes or just until

chips are melted and mixture is smooth when stirred. Stir in peanuts. Drop by teaspoonfuls into 1-inch candy papers. Allow to set until firm. Store in airtight container in cool, dry place. Makes 2 dozen servings

Source: <http://foodgeeks.com/>

Pecan Pralines

The quintessential New Orleans candy.

3/4 cup brown sugar

3/4 cup white sugar

1/2 cup evaporated milk

1/2 teaspoon vanilla

2 tablespoons butter

1 cup pecans

Combine the sugar and milk and cook slowly in a heavy pot over a low flame until it reaches the soft ball stage (238 degrees on a candy thermometer). Remove from heat and add the butter, vanilla and pecans. Beat mixture with a wooden spoon until it is smooth and creamy. Drop by spoonfuls onto waxed paper. If the candy does not harden within 10 minutes, it may be cooked some more.

Yield: Approximately one dozen

Source: <http://www.chefrick.com/>

Cheese Straws

A very popular appetizer in the South. Cheese straws, made with Cheddar cheese and a little cayenne pepper.

1 stick butter

8 ounces sharp Cheddar cheese

1 3/4 cups all-purpose flour

1/8 teaspoon salt

1/2 teaspoon ground cayenne pepper, more or less

1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

Put the butter and cheese in the container of a food processor. Add the flour, salt, cayenne, and Worcestershire. Cover and blend thoroughly. If a food processor is not used, put the flour, salt and cayenne in a bowl. Add the butter, cheese, and Worcestershire, and using two knives or a pastry blender, blend thoroughly.

Preheat oven to 300 degrees.

Roll the dough out to a 1/8-inch thickness and cut it into individual strips, then twist. A cookie press can be used to make the strips. Arrange the strips on 1 or 2 ungreased baking sheets.

Bake in preheated 300-degree oven for 20 to 25 minutes, or until the straws are crisp and lightly browned. Remove and let cool.

Makes about 5 to 6 dozen.

Source: <http://southernfood.about.com/>

Spiced Cranberry Cider Mix

This spicy cider tastes delicious after winter sports.

1/2 cup dried cranberries

12 cinnamon sticks

1/2 teaspoon crushed whole cloves

2 tablespoons whole allspice

In a small bowl, stir the cranberries and spices together. Store in an airtight container.

Attach this to the jar:

Spiced Cranberry Cider Mix

Serves 12 to 14

2 quarts apple cider

1 quart water

1 package Spiced Cranberry Cider Mix

2 oranges, sliced

In a large saucepan combine the cider, water, and Spiced Cranberry Cider Mix. Heat through but do not boil. Add most of the orange slices. Serve warm, garnished with the remaining orange slices.

Rick McDaniel writes about food and cooking for the Citizen-Times. E-mail him at southerncooking@charter.net.



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