

Raspberry, Coconut and Walnut Shortbread Squares

This recipe was one of two winners in the cookie category in the 2013 Holiday Treats contest. From Linda Joy Willis of Raleigh.

1 1/2 cups (3 sticks) unsalted butter, plus more for greasing pan

3 cups all purpose flour

1 1/2 teaspoons salt

1/2 cup light brown sugar

1/4 cup white sugar

2 teaspoons almond extract

3/4 cup finely chopped walnuts

1 1/2 cups seedless red raspberry preserves

4 cups (10 ounces) shredded coconut

20 red candied cherries

20 green candied cherries

PREHEAT oven to 350 degrees. Grease a 9-by-13-inch baking dish with butter. Set aside.

STIR together flour and salt in a large bowl. Set aside.

MIX together butter, sugars and almond extract in a large mixing bowl with a mixer on medium low speed. With a large spoon, blend in flour mixture. Then stir in walnuts.

PRESS dough evenly into bottom of baking dish. Bake for 36 to 38 minutes, or until golden brown. Remove shortbread from oven and cool for about 15 minutes.

SPREAD raspberry preserves evenly over shortbread. Sprinkle coconut on top and press down lightly. Decorate with four rows of evenly-spaced red cherries, five per row. Cut green cherries into four parts and place around the bottom of the red cherries to create a leaf effect.

Yield: about 20 servings.

Peppermint Crescents

This recipe won an honorable mention in the cookie category in the 2013 Holiday Treats contest. From Colleen Ely of Youngsville.

1 cup butter, softened

2 2/3 cups powdered sugar, divided

1 1/4 teaspoons peppermint extract, divided

1/8 teaspoon salt

2 cups all purpose flour

2 1/2 tablespoons half and half

Coarsely crushed hard peppermint candies

BEAT butter in large bowl with a mixer at medium speed until creamy. Add 2/3 cup powdered sugar, 1 teaspoon peppermint extract and salt. Beat well. Gradually add flour, beating at low speed just until blended after each addition. Divide dough roughly into thirds; cover and chill for 30 minutes.

PREHEAT oven to 325 degrees. Lightly grease a cookie sheet. Set aside.

WORK with one portion of dough at a time: roll into about a dozen 1-inch balls, then roll each gently into a 2-inch log and curve ends to form a crescent. Place 1 inch apart on cookie sheet. Bake for 18-20 minutes or until lightly browned. Cool on cookie sheets for a minute before placing on wire racks. Carefully roll warm cookies in 1 cup powdered sugar. Let cool completely.

COMBINE remaining 1 cup powdered sugar, half and half and 1/4 teaspoon peppermint extract, stirring until smooth. Drizzle icing over cookies and immediately sprinkle with crushed peppermints, pressing on gently. Let icing set before serving. Store in airtight container.

Yield: about 2 dozen cookies.

Salted Almond Buttercrunch Toffee

This recipe received an honorable mention in the chocolate candy and brittle category in the 2013 Holiday Treats contest. Variations of the recipe were submitted by three different readers: Beverly Phillips of Henderson, Shannon Zarb of Rolesville, and Gabrielle Riggsbee of Pittsboro.

1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, cut up, plus more for buttering dish

1 1/2 cups roasted salted almonds, divided

1 1/2 cups granulated sugar

1 tablespoon light corn syrup

2 tablespoons water

12 ounces semi-sweet chocolate chips, divided in half

LINE a 9-by-13-inch baking dish with aluminum foil or parchment, greased with butter or nonstick spray. Set aside.

CHOP 1 cup almonds coarsely. Set aside. Finely chop remaining 1/2 cup almonds. Set aside.

HEAT butter, sugar, corn syrup and water in a medium saucepan over medium heat until butter melts. Increase heat to medium-high and insert candy thermometer. Keep constant watch on mixture and cook about 12 minutes until golden brown and candy thermometer reaches 300 degrees. Do not stir. Immediately remove from heat, remove thermometer and stir in 1 cup of coarsely chopped almonds.

POUR toffee into prepared pan and quickly spread to the edges using a spatula. Let stand on a wire rack for 30 minutes.

MELT half of chocolate chips in a microwave on high for 45 seconds; stir until smooth. (Note: The time in the microwave may be longer or shorter depending on strength of microwave. You may use double boiler if that is easier for you.)

SPREAD melted chocolate evenly over top of cooled toffee and refrigerate for 20 minutes or longer until firm. Once bar is firm, remove from refrigerator and flip over onto a second sheet of parchment or wax paper. Remove foil or parchment paper stuck the toffee.

MELT remaining chocolate chips in the microwave on high for 45 seconds; stir until smooth. Spread over toffee bar and sprinkle with remaining 1/2 cup of crushed almonds. Use the wax/parchment paper to slide toffee bar back into baking pan. Refrigerate for another 20 minutes.

ONCE chocolate is firm, break bar into 2 1/2-inch pieces. Store airtight at room temperature for up to 1 month.

Yield: about 24 pieces.

Salted Caramel Thumbprints

This recipe won an honorable mention in the cookie category in the 2013 Holiday Treats contest. From Jennifer Smith of Apex, who spotted this winning recipe in the Better Homes and Gardens Christmas Cookie magazine from 2012. Smith used Werther's chewy caramels and semisweet Lindt chocolate bar. She suggested purchasing Fleur de Sel at Whole Foods or online.

2 cups all purpose flour

2/3 cup sugar

1 cup (2 sticks) cold butter, cut up into slices

1/2 teaspoon vanilla

16 unwrapped caramels, such as Werther's chewy caramels

1/3 cup whipping cream

3 ounces coarsely chopped chocolate, semi-sweet or bittersweet

Fleur de Sel salt

PREHEAT oven to 350 degrees. Line cookie sheets with parchment paper and set aside.

COMBINE flour and sugar in a large bowl. Use a pastry blender and cut in butter and vanilla until the mixture resembles fine crumbs and starts to cling together. Form the mixture into a large ball and knead until smooth. (You also could do this step in a standing mixer, which will mix and pull the dough into a ball.)

SHAPE dough into 1-inch balls. Place them about 2 inches apart on the prepared cookie sheets. Using your thumb or the back of a small spoon, make an indentation into each ball. Bake for about 12 to 14 minutes or until edges are light brown. Re-press cookie centers with a spoon if they puffed up during baking. Cool cookies for 5 minutes on the sheets and remove to a wire rack and cool completely.

COMBINE caramels and whipping cream in a small saucepan while the cookies are cooling. Cook and stir

constantly over very low heat until caramels are melted and sauce is smooth. Move cooled cookies onto wax paper on the kitchen counter. Carefully spoon about a teaspoon of the sauce into the indentations of the cookies.

MELT chocolate in a microwave-safe bowl for about 45 seconds to a minute. Stir until smooth. Spoon melted chocolate into a pastry bag or a small plastic bag. If using a plastic bag, cut off a corner. Drizzle melted chocolate back and forth over each cookie. Sprinkle each cookie with a few grains of the Fleur de Sel.

Yield: about 32 cookies.

Sour Cream Pecans

This recipe received an honorable mention in the other candy and brittle category in the 2013 Holiday Treats contest. From John Mandeville of Raleigh.

1/2 cup sour cream

1/2 cup granulated sugar

1 cup brown sugar

1 teaspoon vanilla

2 cups pecans

LINE two cookie sheets with wax paper. Set aside.

MIX sour cream, granulated sugar and brown sugar in a large pan, and continuously stir while cooking over medium-high heat, until mixture reaches 235 degrees on a candy thermometer. This is the “soft ball stage,” or when a drop of the candy dropped into cold water will form a soft ball.

TURN off heat and immediately add vanilla and stir. Add pecans, and stir quickly, coating all nuts. Immediately pour half the mixture onto each cookie sheet and use a fork to separate into desired size (clumps or individual nuts), teasing the nuts apart. Do not make more than one batch at a time or the nuts will be too difficult to separate.

Yield: 2 cups.

Peanut Butter Chocolate Swirl Soft-Baked Cookies

This recipe was one of two that won the cookie category in the 2013 Holiday Treats contest. From Ken Branch of Raleigh.

Chocolate Cookie Dough:

1/2 cup unsalted butter at room temperature

1/2 cup sugar

1/2 cup brown sugar (light or dark)

1 large egg

1 teaspoon vanilla

1 cup all-purpose flour

1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder

1 teaspoon baking soda

1/2 teaspoon salt

2 tablespoons milk

1 cup chocolate chips

Peanut Butter Cookie Dough:

1/2 cup unsalted butter at room temperature

1/2 cup brown sugar (light or dark)

1/4 cup sugar

1 large egg

3/4 cup creamy peanut butter

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1/2 teaspoon baking soda

1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour

1/4 teaspoon salt

1 cup chocolate chips

MAKE chocolate dough: Cream butter and sugars together with a mixer on medium speed until light and fluffy. Scrape down sides and bottom of bowl as needed. Beat in egg and vanilla until combined, scraping down sides again. In a separate bowl, combine flour, cocoa powder, baking soda and salt. Slowly add to wet ingredients. The dough will be very thick. Using a spoon or spatula, mix in milk and then fold in chocolate chips.

MAKE peanut butter dough: Cream butter and sugars together with a mixer on medium speed until light and fluffy. Scrape down sides of bowl as necessary. Mix in peanut butter, egg and vanilla. Scrape down sides again as necessary. Slowly mix in baking soda and flour. Do not over-mix. Fold in chocolate chips.

CHILL both cookie doughs for at least 2 hours.

PREHEAT oven to 350 degrees. Line cookie sheets with parchment paper. Measure 2 tablespoons of the peanut butter cookie dough, and roll it into a ball. Measure 2 tablespoons of chocolate cookie dough, and roll it into a ball. Press two balls together and roll them into 1 large ball. (Do not blend the two balls completely or the

cookies will not swirl properly.) Repeat for each cookie. The chocolate cookie dough will be messy on your hands, so wash or wipe them after you roll each cookie. (If the chocolate cookie dough is not thoroughly chilled, it will be even messier.)

BAKE cookies for 11 to 12 minutes. Do not bake more than 13 minutes. The cookies will look soft, puffy, and almost under-baked. Allow cookies to cool on the cookie sheet. They will continue to set up. After a few minutes, move them to a rack. As they cool, cookies will become firmer. These cookies will remain soft and tasty for just over a week in an airtight container.

Yield: 24 cookies.

Chocolate-Covered Peppermint Stick Bites

This recipe was the winner in the chocolate candy and brittle category in the 2013 Holiday Treat contest. From Amy Engebretson of Fuquay-Varina.

4 red-and-white peppermint sticks or candy canes, about 6 inches long

1 cup graham cracker crumbs

1/4 cup butter, melted

2 (8-ounce) packages cream cheese, softened

1/2 cup sugar

1/2 teaspoon vanilla

1/4 cup sour cream

2 eggs

24 ounces semisweet chocolate, chopped

2 drops peppermint oil or extract

3 tablespoons vegetable shortening

HEAT oven to 300 degrees. Line an 8-inch-square pan with heavy-duty foil so foil extends over sides of pan. Spray foil with cooking spray. Set aside.

PLACE peppermint sticks in a sealed zip-top plastic bag and crush them finely by whacking and then rolling them with a rolling pin. They should resemble crushed ice. Set aside 2 tablespoons of the crushed peppermint. Combine peppermint, graham cracker crumbs and butter in a small bowl. Spread mixture in bottom of foil-lined pan.

BEAT cream cheese in a large bowl until smooth. Add sugar, vanilla, sour cream and eggs and beat until smooth. Pour filling over crust.

BAKE 40-45 minutes or until edges are set. Center will be soft but will set when cool. Refrigerate for 1 1/2 hours or until chilled, then freeze cheesecake about 2 hours or until firm.

REMOVE cheesecake from pan by lifting foil. Cut into about 1-inch pieces, remove from foil and place on

sheet of wax paper.

MELT chocolate and shortening in a 1-quart saucepan. When melted, stir in the peppermint oil or extract. Cool 2 to 3 minutes or until slightly cooled. Place in 2-cup measuring cup.

SPEAR each cheesecake bite with fork; dip in melted chocolate to cover bottom and sides, letting excess drip off. Place on waxed paper. While bites are still moist, sprinkle with reserved peppermint pieces. Refrigerate until ready to serve.

Yield: about 48 servings.

Maple Pecan Bacon Brittle

This recipe won the other candy and brittle category in our 2013 Holiday Treats contest . From James Mullins of Hampton Roads, Va.

8 slices bacon, such as Neese's

1 cup sugar

1/4 cup light corn syrup

1/4 cup maple syrup

1/4 cup water

1/2 teaspoon salt

1 1/2 cups chopped pecans

2 tablespoons unsalted butter or margarine, softened (used unsalted butter)

1 teaspoon baking soda

LINE a medium or large baking sheet with parchment paper. Set aside.

COOK bacon until crisp and drain on paper towels. Chop finely and reserve.

COMBINE sugar, corn syrup, maple syrup, water and salt in a deep-sided 3-quart saucepan. Cook over medium heat until sugar is dissolved, about 10-12 minutes. Fold in pecans and turn heat up to medium-high. Continue cooking, stirring occasionally, until the mixture reaches 300°F on a candy thermometer, about 10-13 minutes.

REMOVE pot from the heat and stir in reserved bacon, butter or margarine and baking soda until well mixed.

POUR mixture onto prepared baking sheet and spread as thinly as possible with a heat-proof spatula. Let cool until hardened, about 30 minutes. Break into pieces to serve.

Yield: 12-18 servings.

