

Homemade Peppermint Patty Marshmallows

First-place winner in the “Chocolate Candy” category in the 2014 Holiday Treat Contest. Adapted from Travis Lewis of Raleigh.

Cooking spray

Powdered sugar

3 packages unflavored gelatin

1 cup cold water, divided

1 1/2 cups sugar

1 cup corn syrup

Pinch of salt

2/3 tablespoon peppermint extract

12 ounces dark chocolate

1 ounce white chocolate, optional

1 cup crushed peppermint candies or candy canes, optional

LINE a 9-by-13-inch baking dish with wax or parchment paper. Spray with cooking spray. Sift powdered sugar into the baking dish. Move pan back and forth until bottom and sides are covered. Remove any excess. Set aside.

PLACE gelatin and 1/2 cup cold water in the bowl of a standing mixer.

COMBINE remaining 1/2 cup water, sugar, corn syrup and salt in a medium saucepan over medium-high heat. Bring mixture to a boil. Once mixture reaches 240 degrees, remove from heat.

TURN on mixer to medium speed. Slowly pour sugar mixture down the side of the mixing bowl to avoid splashing and potential burns. After two minutes, increase the speed to high and mix for 10-15 minutes. The longer you whip, the stiffer your marshmallows will be. One minute before mixture is fully whipped, add peppermint extract.

COAT spatula with cooking spray and pour mixture into paper-lined baking dish. Work as fast as possible to remove marshmallows from bowl and spread into the corners of the pan. Dust with more powdered sugar and cover with plastic wrap. Let sit at least 4 hours or overnight.

ONCE marshmallows are set, dust work surface with powdered sugar and turn out marshmallows from pan. Remove paper. Cut into 2-inch squares.

MELT dark chocolate in the microwave in 15-second intervals, being careful not to burn the chocolate, or on the stovetop with a double boiler. Once melted, dip your marshmallows and coat them thoroughly, and place on a sheet tray lined with parchment paper. If desired, melt white chocolate in the microwave. Drizzle with white chocolate and sprinkle with crushed peppermints.

Yield: about 30 marshmallows.

Chocolate Chip Walnut Macaroon Cookies

First-place winner in the “Drop Cookie” category of the 2014 Holiday Treat Contest. Submitted by Linda Joy Willis of Raleigh. (This is the second time Willis has placed in the contest. Last year, she won for her Raspberry, Coconut and Walnut Shortbread Squares.)

1 1/2 sticks unsalted butter, plus more for buttering parchment paper

9 tablespoons white sugar

9 tablespoons light or dark brown sugar

1 extra large egg

1 teaspoon almond extract

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

1 3/4 cup plus **3 tablespoons** self-rising flour

1 cup chopped walnuts

1 10-ounce package 60% cacao bittersweet chocolate chips

2 cups packaged shredded coconut

HEAT oven to 350 degrees.

LINE a large cookie sheet with parchment paper and butter the parchment paper.

MIX together butter and sugars in a large mixing bowl until well blended. Add egg and blend into the mixture. Add almond and vanilla extracts. Use a large spoon, stir in flour. Then stir in chopped walnuts. Now stir in the chocolate chips.

FORM dough into golf ball-sized portions. Roll each ball of dough in the shredded coconut. Then slightly flatten dough onto the cookie sheet. Place dough balls 2 inches apart.

BAKE for about 16 minutes or until golden brown. Remove cookies from oven and allow to cool.

Yield: About 24 cookies

Insanely Delicious Turtle Cookies

Second-place winner in the “Drop Cookie” category of the 2014 Holiday Treat Contest. Submitted by Gina Bowman of Raleigh. Bowman also won this year’s grand prize for her Salted Whiskey Caramels in the “Other Candy” category.

For the dough:

1 cup all-purpose flour

1/3 cup cocoa powder

1/4 teaspoon salt

8 tablespoons (1 stick) butter, softened

2/3 cup sugar

1 large egg, separated, plus **1 additional** egg white

2 tablespoons milk

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1 1/4 cups pecans, finely chopped

For the caramel filling:

14 soft caramel candies

3 tablespoons heavy cream

For the chocolate drizzle (optional):

2 ounces semi-sweet chocolate

1 teaspoon shortening

COMBINE flour, cocoa, and salt. Set aside.

BEAT butter and sugar with an electric mixer on medium-high speed until light and fluffy, about 2 minutes. Add egg yolk, milk and vanilla; mix until incorporated. Reduce speed to low and add flour mixture until just combined. Wrap dough in plastic wrap and refrigerate until firm, 1 hour.

WHISK egg whites in a bowl until frothy. Place chopped pecans in another bowl. Roll chilled dough into 1-inch balls, dip in egg whites, and then roll in pecans. Place balls about 2 inches apart on a baking sheet. Using a 1/2 teaspoon measuring spoon, make an indentation in the center of each dough ball.

BAKE at 350 degrees until set, about 12 minutes.

MAKE caramel filling: Microwave caramels and cream together in a small bowl, stirring occasionally, until smooth, about 1 to 2 minutes.

ONCE cookies are removed from the oven, gently re-press the indentations. Fill each indentation with about 1/2 teaspoon of the caramel mixture. Cool on the pan for 10 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack to cool completely.

MAKE chocolate drizzle: Place chocolate and shortening in a small zip-top plastic bag. Set bag in a bowl of warm water to soften. Gently knead the chocolate with your fingers until melted and smooth, placing back in the warm water for a minute or two as needed.

SNIP a very small hole in the corner of the plastic bag. Drizzle chocolate over the cooled Turtle Cookies.

Yields: about 15 cookies

Raspberry Hazelnut Shortbread

First-place winner in the “Other Cookie” category in the 2014 Holiday Treat Contest. Submitted by Nick Verna of Morrsville. Verna notes that the cookies can be frozen for up to 1 month if you want to make them ahead of time.

1/2 cup salted butter (at room temperature)

1/3 cup white sugar

1 large egg

2 cups all-purpose flour

About 3/4 cup hazelnuts

1/2 cup seedless good quality raspberry jam

6 ounces chopped semisweet chocolate

BEAT butter and sugar in the bowl of an electric mixer. You will see it change color and texture until it gets lighter in color and fluffy. Beat in the egg until completely incorporated. Add flour until fully incorporated. Divide dough into two round balls. Wrap dough in plastic wrap and refrigerate for exactly 1 hour. (If you refrigerate any longer the dough will get too hard to roll out.)

WHILE dough is in refrigerator, heat oven to 325 degrees. Spread hazelnuts onto a cookie sheet. Bake for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally, or until the skins begin to brown. Remove from oven and increase oven temperature to 350 degrees. Place toasted hazelnuts on a clean kitchen towel and rub them with the towel. Most of the skins should rub off. Chop fine. You need 1/2 cup finely chopped hazelnuts.

ROLL out each ball of dough between two sheets of wax paper into a 15-by-4-inch rectangle. Peel top sheet of wax paper off the dough. Invert the dough (flip it over) onto a cookie sheet that has been covered with parchment paper. Peel off remaining wax paper. Fold the sides inward 1/2 inch, keeping the sides even, to form a lip around the edge of the dough. Repeat for the second ball of dough. Carefully spread half the jam on each rectangle of dough. Sprinkle with chopped hazelnuts.

BAKE cookies for 20-25 minutes until edges are lightly browned. Leave cookies on the cookie sheet for 10 minutes. While still warm, cut each rectangle into 12 slices. Place cut cookies on a wire cooling rack until completely cooled.

MELT chocolate in a double boiler or in the microwave, stirring frequently until just melted. Dip one long end of each cookie into the melted chocolate, being careful not to burn your fingers in the hot chocolate. Let excess chocolate pour off and place each cookie on a sheet of wax paper until completely cooled. Place cookies in an air-tight container with wax paper between the layers of cookies.

Yield: about 24 cookies

Brown Sugar Pecan Crescents

Second-place winner in the “Other Cookie” category in the 2014 Holiday Treat Contest. Adapted from Ginny

Byrne of Raleigh. Byrne notes cookies can be served with ripe pears and blue or gorgonzola cheese. Cookies also can be frozen for up to a month, if placed between sheets of waxed paper in covered plastic containers or resealable plastic freezer bags.

1 cup all-purpose flour

3/4 cup pecans, toasted lightly

1/2 cup (1 stick) chilled, unsalted butter, cut into 1/2 inch cubes

1/4 cup dark brown sugar (packed)

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1/2 teaspoon cinnamon

A pinch of salt

Powdered sugar

HEAT oven to 325 degrees. Combine flour, pecans, butter, brown sugar, vanilla extract, cinnamon and pinch of salt in a food processor. Process until mixture resembles coarse meal. Continue until dough begins to come together in clumps. Gather dough together and place in a bowl.

TAKE a generous teaspoon of dough and roll between palms of your hands to form 2-1/2-inch long rope, tapering at the ends. Place on ungreased cookie sheet and curl up ends to form crescent shape. Repeat with the rest of the dough. Cookies should be spaced about 2 inches apart.

BAKE cookies about 20 minutes or firm enough to touch. Cool on cookie sheet for about 5 minutes. Transfer to wire rack and cool completely. Sift powdered sugar over cookies.

Yield: about 36 cookies.

Salted Whiskey Caramels

The grand prize-winning recipe in the 2014 Holiday Treat Contest. First-place winner in the “Other Candy” category by Gina Bowman of Raleigh. Bowman also won for her Insanely Delicious Turtle Cookies in the “Drop Cookie” category.

5 tablespoons butter

1 cup heavy whipping cream

2 ounces (1/4 cup) whiskey, such as Jack Daniel’s or other brand

1 teaspoon vanilla

1 tablespoon and **1/4 teaspoon** kosher (coarse) salt, divided

1 1/2 cups sugar

1/4 cup light corn syrup

1/4 cup water

LINE a 9-inch square pan with parchment or wax paper, allowing paper to drape over two sides to create a sling that will help remove caramels later. Spray paper lightly with cooking spray.

BRING butter, heavy whipping cream, whiskey, vanilla and 1/4 teaspoon salt to a boil in a 1-quart saucepan, stirring frequently. Remove from heat; set aside.

MIX sugar, corn syrup and water in a 3-quart saucepan. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Do not stir. Boil until sugar turns a warm golden brown.

WHEN sugar mixture reaches 310 degrees on a candy thermometer, turn off heat and slowly add cream mixture. Be careful; it will bubble up violently. Cook over medium-low heat for about 10 minutes, stirring constantly until the mixture reaches 248 degrees. Pour caramel into pan; cool 10 minutes. Sprinkle with up to 1 tablespoon salt; cool completely.

CUT into squares; wrap individually in parchment paper.

Yield: 64 servings.

Frosted Cranberries

Second-place winner in the “Other Candy” category in the 2014 Holiday Treat Contest. Submitted by Nancy Margolis of Raleigh.

1 tablespoon water

1 tablespoon pasteurized egg white or liquid egg white substitute

1 (12-ounce) package fresh cranberries, rinsed, but not completely re-dried.

1 cup white sugar

STIR together water and egg white in a medium bowl until blended but not whipped. Add cranberries and stir gently until coated.

SPREAD sugar out in a 9-by-13-inch cake pan. Add cranberries to the sugar a handful at a time, being careful to let any excess liquid drip off before you drop them onto the sugar. Roll cranberries by shaking fast until they are completely coated with sugar.

PLACE berries on a sheet of waxed paper to dry at room temperature for two hours.

Yield: about 36 servings.

Pecan Millionaires

Second-place winner in the “Chocolate Candy” category in the 2014 Holiday Treat Contest. Submitted by two readers, Patricia Sasser of Youngsville, and Carolyn Fordham of Raleigh. Fordham’s version calls for Hershey’s candy bars for the chocolate.

1 stick margarine or butter

14 ounces caramel candy squares

2 cups chopped pecans

8 ounces chocolate candy coating, such as CandiQuik

MELT margarine or butter and caramels together in a heavy saucepan over low heat. Stir until well blended.

ADD pecans and stir to thoroughly distribute nuts. Drop teaspoonfuls onto waxed paper and leave to harden.

ONCE cool, use microwave to melt chocolate candy coating, following package instructions. Dip each piece of caramel-pecan candy and fully coat with chocolate. Place on wax paper and allow to harden.

Yield: about 30 pieces.