

Christmas Treats I Made, 2019

For the holiday, I sent out care packages to several people I know. I made an old favorite and two new ones. Since I was shipping them, I picked things that I thought would travel well and survive to their destination. I packed them in reusable but disposable plastic containers, and I believe they all arrived in ok shape.

The old favorite was [Scotcheroos](#) , a recipe I learned from my wife's family, years ago and share here. It's layer of candied rice crispies, covered with a layer of "frosting," made by melting chocolate and butterscotch morsels together for a couple of minutes in the microwave. Certainly not haute cuisine, but it's a requirement in her family that when two or more are gathered together, a batch of scotcheroos must be made. Though I was thwarted and couldn't send out as many as I wanted to. There was a local run on the butterscotch morsels. I went to at least half a dozen grocery stores in a 5 mile radius around my house. And I couldn't find them anywhere. Ends up, every store I went to had them on sale, and every store was sold out. Either a lot of scotcheroos were being made, or more likely, I suspect, someone in the area bought them all up with the idea of selling them on the internet.

Which led to the next new item ... **Chocolate Pretzel Morsels** . This is something my wife discovered when I made a batch of Scotcheroos and had too much of the frosting left over. Dipping little pretzels in the liquified chocolate and butterscotch morsels and letting the air dry. A nice little holiday hors d'oeuvre. Though, with the shortage of butterscotch morsels this year, I ended up mixing chocolate and peanut butter morsels. Just as good in this case. Maybe even better. Use the pretzels that are 1" long and thick around as your thumb.

The last item was Paula Deen's [Pecan Praline Morsels](#) . Three

ingredients – heavy cream, brown sugar, and pecan halves, roasted in a hot oven until the liquid evaporates. Really easy to make, and really irresistible. I considered adding a bit of cayenne, but my wife nixed the idea. For what it's worth, a single 2 cup bag of shelled pecan halves cost \$8.99 this year.

Roast Broccoli Hero Sandwiches

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup bread-and-butter pickles, drained, plus 1/2 cup of their brine
- 1 clove garlic, finely chopped
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped peeled fresh ginger root
- 2 tablespoons Asian chili sauce, such as Sriracha, sambal oelek or gochujang
- 1 teaspoon toasted sesame oil
- 1 medium head broccoli (about 1 1/4 pounds), chopped into florets, stalk thinly sliced into coins
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- Four 6-inch French bread rolls
- 1/4 cup mayonnaise
- 1/2 cup prepared fried onions (preferably Lars Own Crispy Onions; see headnote)
- 2 ounces ricotta salata, shaved

DIRECTIONS

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees.

Combine the pickles and brine, garlic, ginger, chili sauce and

toasted sesame oil in a medium bowl. Marinate at room temperature while you make the sandwiches.

Toss together the broccoli, oil and salt on a large baking sheet; roast until the broccoli is bright green, is starting to brown on the edges and is easily pierced with a fork but not soft, 15 to 20 minutes. Let cool.

Position an oven rack 4 to 6 inches from the broiler element; preheat the broiler.

Split the rolls, leaving them hinged. Open them and set on a large baking sheet and lightly toast under the broiler, 1 to 2 minutes; watch closely to keep them from burning.

To assemble the sandwiches, lightly spread mayonnaise on the insides of the rolls. Divide the roasted broccoli evenly among them. Use a slotted spoon to lift the pickles out of their marinade and evenly distribute them on the broccoli, then layer the fried onions and ricotta salata on top.

Serve the pickle marinade with the sandwiches, for dipping.

Make Ahead: The pickles can marinate in the refrigerator for up to 5 days in advance.

Hearty Beef and Hominy Chili

- 1 lb ground lean beef (7% or less)
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 1 small green bell pepper, chopped
- 1 jalapeno pepper, seeded and minced (optional)
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 (14½ ounce) can of diced tomatoes

- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup tomato paste
- 1 T chili powder
- 1 t ground cumin
- 1 t dried oregano
- $\frac{1}{4}$ t salt
- 1 (15 ounce) can hominy, rinsed and drained

Garnishes (optional)

- 2 T chopped fresh cilantro
- 2 scallions, thinly sliced
- 3 radishes, finely chopped
- 1 avocado, diced

Combine beef, onion, bell pepper, jalapeno, and garlic in a dutch oven and set over medium heat. Cook beef, breaking it up with a wooden spoon until browned, about 10 minutes. Stir in tomatoes, tomato paste, chili powder, cumin, oregano, and salt; bring to boil. Reduce heat and simmer, partially covered, until chili thickens slightly, about 30 minutes. Stir in hominy and cook until heated through, about 3 minutes. Serve with optional garnishes.

Bay Leaf Seasoning

[Penzey's Spices](#) used to put out an herb mix that was great for roasting chicken. Apparently, I was the only one who bought it, because they stopped selling it a couple years ago. Here's how to make it yourself. Aside from the bay leaves, you'll only use a portion of the other ingredients, so you can make multiple batches, or use them in your other recipes. Not counting the salt and pepper, the total cost today is 16.44.



[1/2 oz bag bay leaves](#) (2.65)

[2 T thyme leaves](#) (2.95)

[2 T rosemary leaves](#) (2.49)

[1 T basil leaves](#) (2.45)

[1 T dried onion](#) (2.95)

[1 T oregano](#) (2.95)

1/2 t ground pepper

[2 T garlic salt](#) (2.95)

1 T plain salt

Grind together in a food processor or spice grinder until it's a course powder.

Braised Butternut Squash

This is an afghan recipe called *bouranee kadu* or *borani kadoo*. Traditionally, it's made with pumpkin, but it's easier to find and buy butternut squash, already peeled and cut, though you'll probably need to cut some of the pieces into smaller chunks. It's sometimes served as a whole meal, with a layer of spicy ground meat, but I think it's best as a side dish, especially with roasted poultry. It's perfect in the autumn.



1 pound butternut squash
1 medium yellow onion
4 tablespoons vegetable oil
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoon minced garlic
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoon minced ginger
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon turmeric powder
1 teaspoon coriander powder
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon chili powder or according to

taste

$\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoon tomato paste or $\frac{1}{2}$ cup tomato puree

1 cup water or stock (chicken or vegetable)

3 tablespoons sugar

salt

Dried or fresh mint for garnish

If you're using a whole butternut squash, peel it, and using a spoon, scoop out the inner membrane and seeds. Cut the flesh into 1 inch cubes and set aside.

Peel and place the onion in a food processor and puree.

Heat oil in a medium heavy bottom pan or wok. Carefully add the onion puree and cook on medium-low heat until it is golden, about 10 minutes. Then add ginger, garlic, turmeric, coriander powder, and chili powder and stir for 1 minute or until fragrant.

Now add tomato paste or puree, water, sugar and salt, bring to a boil, while stirring.

Add the chopped butternut squash or pumpkin pieces. Reduce heat and simmer uncovered, stirring occasionally, until the squash is cooked and slightly translucent, but still holding its shape, about 30 minutes. Add more water while cooking, if needed.

Garnish with mint and serve with garlic yogurt and naan.

Garlic Yogurt

1/2 cup plain yogurt
1 clove garlic minced
Salt

Whisk everything together.

Time for Tomatoes

It's about 10 weeks to last frost here in zone 7. So if you live near me, then it's time to start your tomato and pepper seedlings.



This year, I'm trying five new varieties... two big beefsteak heirlooms called *Country Taste*, and *Grandma's Pick*; a medium-sized orange variety called *Moonglow* that's supposed to be one of the best for straight-off-the-vine eating (though I would

think that they would say that about all tomatoes, wouldn't they?) ; a cherry variety called *Sweet Million*; and a yellow/green one called *Pork Chop*.

I'm also going to try growing the seedlings in egg shells that I have been saving since November. Supposedly, the added calcium will be a benefit to the plants down the road, but I'm wondering if it would be wiser to just handle the seedlings in a more normal way, and crush up the eggshells and add them when I put the plants in the ground.

Whole Foods-like Tomato Bisque

When I make this, I go to the trouble of peeling fresh tomatoes for this recipe, because I think the flavor benefits, but I know that's more of a hassle than probably most people would go to. I usually start with two or three of the containers of fresh tomatoes that they sell at Costco. I'll also shred the carrot using a food processor, but if you'd rather not dirty up your processor bowl, you can probably get away with finely dicing it. The vermouth is crucial for the flavor, so don't skip it. And fresh dill can sometimes be really hard to find in the grocery store, but I've found a product that is a god-send ... it's fresh dill in a tube, like toothpaste, sold under the name "Gourmet Garden," and I use it quite generously. You will find it in the produce department, and it works perfectly for this recipe. I'm told that this soup freezes well, but it's never stayed around long enough for me to find out.

*3-4 (or more) lbs fresh **tomatoes**, peeled and cored, or 3*

large cans of organic tomatoes

*1 large **onion**, chopped*

*3 or 4 large **carrots**, shredded*

*2 or 3 cloves of **garlic***

olive oil

*$\frac{1}{2}$ c **dry vermouth***

fresh dill

salt and pepper to taste

If you're starting with fresh tomatoes, boil a pot of water, and fill another bowl with cold water. Cut an X, or just slit the skin on the bottoms of the tomatoes. Dunk the tomatoes, 6-8 at a time, in the boiling water until the skin starts to loosen. (It'll wrinkle and start to peel.) Remove them with a spider and cool them off in the bowl of cold water until you can handle them. Remove the peel, and the stem/core, and cut the tomatoes into quarters, reserving as much as the liquid as you can.

Saute onions until translucent, add carrots and saute a few more minutes. Add garlic, and stir until fragrant. Deglaze with vermouth. Add tomatoes, salt and pepper to taste, add a generous amount (1 T, at least) of fresh dill, chopped. Simmer for 30-45 minutes. Taste, adjust seasoning. Puree with a stick blender, or in blender in batches.

Orecchiette with Sausage, Baby Kale, and Bell Pepper

(Even though this recipe is called orecchiette, I've made it with other shapes of pasta. Rigatoni works well.)

2 $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoons kosher salt
1 teaspoon olive oil
1 medium onion, chopped
1 medium red bell pepper, chopped
5 garlic cloves, crushed
Freshly cracked black pepper
14 oz sweet Italian chicken sausage, casing removed
6 cups baby kale
10 oz orecchiette (or other shaped pasta)
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup grated pecorino romano
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon crushed red pepper (optional)

Start a large pot of water boiling, with 2 teaspoons of salt.

Meanwhile, heat a large, deep nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add the olive oil, onion and red bell pepper, crushed garlic, and the rest of the salt. Cook, stirring until soft, 4 to 5 minutes. Add the sausage and cook, breaking up the sausage using a wooden spoon, and brown for 10 minutes. Add the kale, and cover, and cook for 8 to 10 minutes, then remove the cover, and stir and let the moisture evaporate.

Add the pasta to the boiling water, and cook according to the directions on the package. Drain, reserving 1 cup of the pasta water. Mix the sausage mixture and the pasta and the reserved water. Cook together until the water evaporates. Remove from heat and mix in the cheese and the optional red pepper flakes.

Chocolate Birthday Cake with Vanilla Frosting

I don't often get called to make birthday cakes, but when I do, this is the recipe I use. It's practically foolproof, and

completely rich and delicious, with dark chocolate cake mounded with sweet, white frosting. I usually make it as a layer cake, but it works perfectly fine as a sheet cake or even cupcakes –just use the toothpick method to figure out the proper cooking time.

Cake :

butter, for the pans

3 c **all-purpose flour**, plus a little more for the pans

2/3 c **cocoa powder**

2 teaspoons **baking soda**

2 c **sugar**

1 teaspoon **kosher salt**

1/2 c **canola (or corn) oil**

2 tablespoon **distilled white vinegar**

1 tablespoon **vanilla extract**

1 cup **water**

1 cup **cold coffee**

- Preheat the oven to 350°. Butter and flour two 9-inch cake pans, and line the bottoms with parchment.
- Gently mix together the dry ingredients in your mixing bowl with the beater blade.
- With the mixer on low, add the oil, vinegar, and vanilla, and mix, then add the water and the coffee, and blend until well mixed.
- Pour the batter equally into the cake pans, and back for 30 minutes, swapping and turning them after 15. You know they're done when a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean.
- Cool completely in the pans.

Frosting:

1-1/2 cup **sugar**

1/2 cup **water**

3 **large egg whites**

1/4 teaspoon **cream of tartar**

pinch of **salt**

2 teaspoon **vanilla extract**

- Bring the sugar and water to a boil in a small saucepan, and heat to 240° or soft-ball stage. Meanwhile, start beating the egg whites, the cream of tartar, and the salt in your mixer until foamy.
 - Once the sugar syrup is at temperature, resume beating the egg whites on high, and add the hot syrup in a slow drizzle.
 - Add the vanilla, and continue mixing until the frosting is glossy and the mixing bowl is cool to the touch.
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Cauliflower Soup

1 medium **onion**, chopped

1 **leek**, cleaned and chopped (white and light green parts only)

1 t **salt**

1½ T **butter**

1 **cauliflower** (about 2 lbs. trimmed, cut in half, and sliced into ½ inch pieces)

4½ c **water**



In a large pot, sweat the onions and leeks with the butter for about 5 minutes with the salt. Add half of the cauliflower, along with the stem which you've peeled and sliced, and the water. Bring to a boil and then simmer for 15 or 20 minutes. Add the rest of the cauliflower, and simmer for another 15 minutes. Blend the soup with an immersion blender until smooth.

When thinking like a weight-watcher, the only thing that you have to calculate, points-wise is the butter. Since this recipe makes about 6 servings, that works out to about 2 points a serving. Note: Don't be tempted to replace the butter with bacon drippings, or the water with chicken stock – the soup is pretty delicate, and the strong flavors of these two items will overwhelm the subtle flavors of the cauliflower.

This recipe is based on an article in the September, 2013 issue of Cooks Illustrated. The reason why this recipe works, apparently, is the two stage cooking method. Cooking cauliflower for 15 minutes brings out the bright, pungent, cabbage-like flavors, while cooking it for 30 minutes brings out its nutty side. By splitting it up, you get the best of both worlds, but since neither flavor is going to knock you out, you can't use other overpowering flavors, like garlic, bacon drippings, or chicken stock. And the beauty of the cauliflower is that when blended, you get all the satisfying feeling of a creamy soup without adding any cream.

The Cook's Illustrated recipe goes on to have you add another 5 or so tablespoons of browned butter, plus some little bits of cauliflower sauteed in it, with a touch of sherry vinegar, but since I'm watching my weight, I eschewed the extra butter for a lower calorie soup.

