



**ISSUE # 10**

**From the Kitchen of Marybeth Gregg December 2005**

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**Take Time to Enjoy the Season**

From the first day of winter to Christmas to Chanukah to Kwanzaa, December is totally filled with holidays to celebrate – well, except for that first day of winter. And so this newsletter is also filled with lots of cooking and entertaining tips and holiday recipes just for you.

With all of this celebrating, we tend to wear ourselves out pretty quickly. Already this past weekend, I saw people fighting over a parking space. How ridiculous did that look? And the season has barely begun. So make every attempt to keep it in perspective. Nothing has to be perfect – really. If you don't have the chance to totally transform each gift into a beautiful package, or make a 5 course meal, it is ok.

Especially this time of year, plan ahead, make those lists, organize your meals and shopping trips and trips to stores that are clustered together. Ask yourself- "how can I make this easier on myself?" each time you are faced with a holiday project. Make a list of what are the most important things for you to do, top to bottom, and then decide what gets done and what will not be done this year. Like those Christmas cards – for me, the list does get smaller because for whatever reason, that is not something I really enjoy doing. So I gave myself permission to cut back, and hope that my friends will understand. It is a little relief which gives me more time to spend on more pleasurable activities. So go ahead – make your own list and give yourself and your family a little more time to enjoy what this season is all about.

*WISH BIG and be grateful for all you have. . . Merry Christmas, Happy Chanukah and Happy Holidays to you and your family. . .*

*Marybeth Gregg*

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### **Elegant and Simple Table Decorations**

There are two themes that I enjoy most at the holidays- one is sparkle and the other is natural. That almost seems like they are opposed to each other, but I enjoy both, depending upon the mood I am in.

To start choose a theme and choose your color scheme. For example, I love all silver, or silver and blue, or red, red, red. You might also enjoy different shades of green with gold. Experiment- choose what make you happy.

For sparkle, I love lots of glass balls of different sizes and textures. (Target is a great place to find lots of these at great prices.) You can also buy silk flowers dusted with glitter, or even pine cones that are sprayed gold or silver.

For natural, if you have a yard or park nearby, go clip evergreen branches, holly branches, and whatever else looks like winter. Yesterday I bought some plain fresh wreaths and went into the yard and cut some juniper branches to tuck in the wreaths. Add bright ribbons and balls that are glittery and you have a lovely and inexpensive wreath. It only took about 15 minutes to finish these.

Fill a vase with assorted nuts in their shells and add some branches and ribbons.

For your centerpiece, fill smaller vases with fresh cranberries and water and add red and white roses, carnations, and lilies, and some evergreen stems for a really beautiful arrangement.

### **GET CREATIVE WITH THEMES:**

Choose a candy-cane theme. Use red and white flowers, with candy canes hanging from the rim of the vase. Use candy canes as place cards. Have a white tablecloth with a red runner. Tie red and white ribbon on napkins.

Ribbons are a wonderful way to decorate. Choose a color and go from there. Add ribbons to a chandelier and hang gold or silver snowflakes for a festive look.

You can choose a jingle bell theme- use silver as the main color, add bells and little sleighs on the table to your centerpiece, or add bells to your place cards. Silver stars are also a really nice selection with the bells.

Blue and white or blue and silver are delightful for the season. Dress the table with a white tablecloth, use a beautiful blue runner, perhaps in an organza that you can get from the fabric store. Use silver candles or silver menorah, or silver snowflakes. Tie shiny silver ribbons around napkins. White flowers such as lilies or white roses mixed with silver spray are a very elegant look.

## **SOUNDS AND AROMAS**

The holidays are about not just the presentation, but also about feeding the other senses. Be sure to have some favorite music playing, especially while wrapping gifts. Light some scented candles, put a pot of water filled with cinnamon sticks, orange peels and cloves. Simmer on low – just be careful the water doesn't boil out. These will add to your enjoyment and, if you let it, will help to restore some calmness everyone.

***So these are just some ideas. Pick something that makes you happy and go from there. BE creative – get the kids involved and have fun.***

## **HOLIDAY SECRETS TO ENJOYING YOURSELF**

### **Small Stress Reducers For Entertaining**

Have small gatherings or an open-house and limit the time that guests will be there.

Order some foods, such as appetizers, or the main course or the desserts from a local specialty food store who has a great reputation for excellent food. This way you can concentrate on just one or two things that you make yourself.

Or, if they offer, have guests bring an appetizer or dessert to cut down on the number of courses you need to make.

**PLAN AHEAD:** from the guest list to the foods to the drinks, start at least 3 weeks in advance and make those lists.

Sometimes you need to say no! If you are overwhelmed, you can graciously decline an invitation and just go to those events where you know you will enjoy yourself.

These little things can add up to helping you find some real pleasure this season.

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## December Recipes: Lots of recipes for you this month. Enjoy!

### DRINKS

#### Punch

Punch is making a comeback- it's easy, and can be done ahead or you can throw it together at the last minute. Just use your favorite fruit juices – a mix of cranberry, pineapple, ginger ale, orange juice. Add some fruit slices – oranges, apples, lemons, maraschino cherries and you are ready to go. Add spirits such as champagne or serve it as a non-alcoholic drink. There are hundreds of recipes on line – look for your favorite and serve, chilled, in a festive bowl.

#### Poinsettia

In a champagne glass, fill it 2/3 of the way with chilled champagne, add 1/4 ounce of Triple Sec, add a splash of chilled cranberry juice. Garnish with a twist of orange or lemon.

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### SOOTHING SOUP

Here is a luscious soup that you can serve as a first course for your holiday meal. It is soothing and light – and as, usual, can be made one to two days ahead.

#### Leek and Celery Bisque

3 tablespoons butter  
4 cups sliced celery (about 12 stalks)  
2 cups chopped leeks (white and pale green parts only; about 4-5 medium to large leeks, cleaned – be careful to rinse well and par dry)  
1 large Yukon Gold potato, peeled, diced  
4 cups + chicken broth  
1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper  
1/2 cup crème fraîche (plus additional or low-fat sour cream for garnish)  
Fresh ground pepper and salt to taste

Chopped fresh parsley, rosemary sprig (optional)

Melt butter in heavy large pot over medium-high heat. Add celery and leeks. Sauté until celery is slightly softened, about 4 minutes. Add potato and 4 cups broth. Bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium-low. Simmer, uncovered, until all vegetables are tender, about 30 - 45 minutes.

Remove from heat. Use a hand held immersion blender to blend well, or use a processor or blender in batches. Return to pot. If you are serving this the same day, whisk in 1/3 cup crème fraîche and cayenne pepper. Season soup to taste with salt and pepper.

(If making this ahead - Cool, then cover and refrigerate. Rewarm over medium heat before serving, adding more broth to thin if desired. This can be prepared 2 days ahead – add the crème fraiche and cayenne pepper when you are reheating the soup.)

Ladle soup into bowls. Swirl 1 to 2 teaspoons additional crème fraîche into each. Sprinkle with parsley or rosemary sprig, if desired.

Makes 4-6 servings.

## **EASY APPETIZER**

### **Figs/Dates/Endives with Saga Blue Stuffing and Balsamic Glaze:**

You can choose the figs dates or endives, depending on your preference. I like to mix them up.

Mixture of: 15 fresh Calimyrna or Mission Figs or 1 8 oz. package dried figs\*  
10 Medjool dates, halved and pitted  
Leaves from two Belgian Endives, separated and washed  
6 ounces Saga Blue or other soft cheese, softened at room temperature  
Balsamic Syrup for drizzling (can purchase at most specialty food stores)  
15 walnut halves, toasted

\*If using dried figs, first cook gently in light syrup (one cup sugar to one pint water) until plump. Drain and cool.

Cut figs and dates in half lengthwise. Separate leaves of Endives- cut off bottoms if too large. Spread soft cheese on each piece, top with walnut half, and drizzle with balsamic syrup.

Garnish with grape leaves, or other flat, broad green leaves and red grapes.

## **CHOCOLATE AND MORE CHOCOLATE**

Please go to the website ([www.girlfriendsinthekitchen.com](http://www.girlfriendsinthekitchen.com)) for two scrumptious chocolate dessert recipes you and your guests will love.

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## **ASK THE COOK!**

This question was emailed to me and I thought that you would find it informative:

**C.W. writes:** "I am tired of serving turkey. What else can you recommend for a group of about 10 people for Christmas dinner? Thanks for your help."

**Marybeth:** "I recommend a beef tenderloin. Have your butcher trim and tie it. You can sauté it briefly just to brown the outside, and bake it at 425° for about 25 – 35 minutes, for medium doneness, depending on weight. Ask the butcher for more specific cooking instructions for the size of the roast you are buying. Make a red wine and mushroom sauce – can be done the day before- slice and serve.

You could also do a ham- this again can be done in advance and just reheated. I love a cherry sauce for it. Bake, carve and enjoy.

Make several interesting side dishes, have people bring desserts, and you are all set."

Be sure to keep sending your cooking questions- I love to hear from you all.

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## "GIRLFRIENDS IN THE KITCHEN"

### New Logo and Website in Process

If you've been on my website lately, you will see a new name, [www.girlfriendsinthekitchen.com](http://www.girlfriendsinthekitchen.com). I have decided to focus more on women - not to exclude the men. It's just that almost all of the feedback and interest has been from women so that's what I am responding to. (In addition, I still have the Confident Cook Cooking School of New Jersey for everyone.)

I have been blessed to have met a wonderful graphic artist and designer, Leeza Hernandez-Stelzer, who has produced the most beautiful logo. She really understood my vision and came up with this design –

Leeza explains - "The seeds in the apple represent friendships and the idea of growth together, apples seeds lead to trees, growth, solid friendships, etc. Bringing in the knife/fork element and a tablecloth to represent a gathering." Pretty cool stuff- I am very excited about this change and this design. (If you have any graphic design needs, I would recommend Leeza very highly [www.conkertree.com](http://www.conkertree.com) )

I'll be able to offer some real products to you in a short while – neat aprons, utensils, etc. They will be useful and stylish and I know you will really enjoy them.

So that is why I have decided to change the name of the Cook Book – it will be **GIRLFRIENDS IN THE KITCHEN**. It is designed to be fun and filled with memories – a series of recipes and stories of women who will share their memories of cooking with their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, cousins, daughters and girlfriends.

I have used a lot of the recipes that I intended for my original idea, with lots of extras focusing on us girls and their stories. I'd still love to have some more stories from you – happy, funny, memorable, and a recipe if you would like, for inclusion into this book.)

If you are interested, please send an email to me at [marybeth.gregg@verizon.net](mailto:marybeth.gregg@verizon.net), or go to [www.cookwithjoy.com](http://www.cookwithjoy.com) and I will give you all of the details. I am so excited and I hope you will be a part of this, too.

## UPCOMING NEWS

New recipes for the new year.

A feature about nutrition.

Another new guest contributor whose information I know you will love.

## Food for Thought

America's Second Harvest Network is responding to Hurricane Relief disaster and to others in need of basic food. Please visit their Web site: [www.secondharvest.com](http://www.secondharvest.com).

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I hope you enjoy this issue. I continue to get emails telling how much people look forward to my newsletter – thank you. It makes me feel really good to hear from you. If there is anything of particular interest that you would like me to include, be sure to let me know. You can reach me at: [marybeth.gregg@verizon.net](mailto:marybeth.gregg@verizon.net).

Enjoy the best of the season!

GO TO MY WEBSITE FOR MORE RECIPES AND TIPS

Website- [www.girlfriendsinthekitchen.com](http://www.girlfriendsinthekitchen.com)

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Marybeth Gregg has been cooking, entertaining and giving cooking advice for almost 20 years. She is well-known for her wonderful cuisine and great parties. She started her successful cooking school two years ago. She has attended cooking schools in Chicago, Philadelphia and in the New York metropolitan area. She lives in central New Jersey and has been featured in the Asbury Park Press and the Coast Star newspapers and was one of only ten culinary experts to be invited to the Spring Lake Kitchen Tour this fall.

Visit my [Cook With Confidence Web Site](#)

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