

Girlfriends in the **KITCHEN**



ISSUE # 15

From the Kitchen of Marybeth Gregg

December 2006

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This issue is filled to the brim with holiday cheer.

A Time for Giving, A Time For Receiving

The first week of December always brings a feeling of anticipation and anxiety. Christmas or Chanukah will be upon us in a flash. Everything is ready to burst and, as usual, are there many of us who are ready? Most likely not, so this is a good week to think not just about what we need to do, but how we are going to think and act over this busy time. This quote has me thinking so I wanted to share it with you:

*"Shall we make a new rule of life from tonight: always try
to be a little kinder than is necessary?"*

James Matthew Barrie — 1860 – 1937, Author of Peter Pan

How many times in our quest for perfection – the right gift, the perfectly cook meal – do we snap at our kids, at the salesperson, or the checkout clerk at the grocery store? Last week I went to California for a conference and a woman cut in line in front of me at the check-in kiosk. I heard myself make one of those 'tsk' noises which got her attention – she had no idea that she cut in line. I was embarrassed – I could have just been gracious and let her in - no big deal. That made me aware that I really needed to decompress, be kinder, and enjoy my trip.

So what does this have to do with food? Well, trying to prepare for all of those meals leaves everyone a bit cranky and worn out.

This is the time of year when we ask a lot of our selves and of others. It is an especially great time to think about what we are doing and why we are doing it.

Is there a tradition that no one really enjoys but is kept up because, well, it is the tradition? Why not start a new one that is more meaningful?

Is there a chore that you do which you really dislike? Who can help?

Are you left to do everything yourself which makes you resentful? There are lots of answers to that one.

If so, this is a great time to ask yourself how really essential is the task. Take the time to eliminate anything which doesn't give you pleasure, and replace it with something that does. By separating out what is important, you will bring the joy back into your holiday season.

No matter what happens, be kind and keep your good cheer. It will have an amazing effect on you and others.

The recipes this month are designed to bring you some joy and cheer. I've also included some new ideas for decorating home and table.

WISH BIG for a wonderful Christmas and New Year, and be grateful for all you have. . .

Merry Christmas, Happy Chanukah and a very Happy and Joyful New Year to you and your family. . .

Holiday Table Decorations

Twigs and Things

Take a walk in the woods - a great family outing - and collect long twigs, pinecones, thistle, greens, ivy and other clippings. (Just make sure you are allowed to take some cuttings and wear gloves. Be careful of poisonous plants, too.) This way you will get some exercise and also collect beautiful and natural decorations to fill containers inside and outside of your home.

If you can't get out or if there are no woods nearby, you can go to where Christmas trees are sold and most of the time they will have a 'free' pile of branches you can take away. You can then buy some interesting greens such as juniper, holly, winterberry, cedar, magnolia, and mix things up for a look of abundance. Add red or white branches and berries and you have an elegant and natural look.

Containers

Use urns or boxes of any kind. A wonderful crafter I know (Shelly from upstate New York whose website I lost) uses old sewing machine drawers for a container. Dig out your old buckets, crystal vases, or earthenware containers – look around to see what

you have. Think round, square or oblong. Not everything needs to be in a vase. Old cookie tins, terra cotta pots, soup tureens, wire egg baskets, cast iron pots, all make beautiful and different ways to display your holiday arrangements. Be sure that they are lined with a waterproof liner.

Add fresh flowers as you desire, and your handmade arrangements will bring everyone much pleasure.

Table Settings

Select a theme or color first.

Breakfast with Santa, candy canes, silver bells, trees, angels, snowmen, seashells, snowflakes, ice skates, Christmas by the palm trees— you get the idea. Or simple choose a color:

Green, white and silver – polish old silver candlesticks and tie each with sheer silver mesh ribbons and a sprig of evergreen.

Tie sea stars to garland and add silver spray paint or sparkles.

Red and white candy canes – tie candy canes on your tree, hang from sconces and chandeliers, tie with ribbon and place on your plates, make or buy a wreath of candy canes.

Blue white and silver – use lots of stars, forced hyacinth bulbs in white and blue, white twigs, white tulips, and silver or white snowflakes tied with sheer blue or velvet ribbons.

Red, red, red – use pomegranates, amaryllis, red pears, red tulips - look in your vegetable isle and at the florist for many ideas. Combine red with red, red with silver – whatever you choose with red, looks spectacular.

Deep pink or rich purple – use lavender velvet bows and silver and purple ornaments with some lavender candles for a refreshing new look.

Silver and gold – a theme of all silver or all gold is very elegant. Vases filled with silver bells, or gold balls are really beautiful matched with an abundance of votive candles. Just add sheer silver or gold ribbon on the table and you have captured the sparkle of the season.

Guest Contributor

I want to introduce a guest contributor this month – Shelley MacDonald Beaulieu from Canada. Shelley is a talented chef and has wonderful ideas to share with you. Her bio is below and you can visit her website for lots of recipes and cooking tips and for the two delicious cookie recipes that she mentions.

Shelly writes:

"7 CHRISTMAS RITUALS YOU CAN START THIS YEAR"

"Rituals are the glue that holds us together. We like doing certain things at certain times of the year. We pass down traditions from Gramma to kidlet. And Christmas is the perfect time to have some food-based rituals.

I recently married a wonderful man who had no Christmas traditions. No special meals, baking, or tree decorating rituals. Last year, I introduced him to some of my Christmas routines.

These are 7 of my food rituals that you can share with your family this year:

1. Have a tree trimming party. I always get my tree the same day each year (December 15th, because I get a live tree). My favourite dinner for the first night we set up the tree is fish chowder and blender drinks (like frozen margaritas). Maybe you set up your artificial tree on December 1st, or right after American Thanksgiving... it doesn't matter. You can celebrate by having the first eggnog of the year.
2. Bake cookies to give away as gifts. Choose something you enjoy, that you can easily accomplish (such as [Spicy Orange Gingersnaps](#) or [Easy Bar Shortbread Cookies](#) with green sprinkles). Wrap up a dozen cookies in a small cardboard box from the Dollar Store, and give them as gifts. You probably have four people near you who'd love to have something homemade ... your landlord, Uncle Don, your child's teacher, the lady who cleans the office, your elderly neighbour. You can make cookies for your spouse to take to work to share with co-workers. Don't overdo it. Pick one or two types, and send a dozen. Too much effort smells like you're trying too hard, and anyway it makes you exhausted which takes the fun out of everything.
3. Have some baking or special meals that you only eat during the holidays. As a child, we only had Cherry Surprises in December, but not in the summer. When I first made this childhood favourite for my new husband, I had to explain that they were a once-yearly event. He didn't really understand why. If they're so good, why not eat them year-round? But let me tell you, this year, starting in November, he's asking "are we having Cherry Surprises this year?" The answer surely is yes. Maybe you make ham on Boxing Day (like I do), or Sherri's bread stuffing (I only make this once a year for Christmas Day dinner), or trifle for New Year's Eve. Pick a couple of things and save them for time of year.

4. Try one new recipe each year and drop one thing you don't like from your list. Food traditions aren't supposed to be stressful, they're supposed to bring comfort and happiness. If making four kinds of tarts the night before your office party is too much, then skip it this year. Make orange gingersnaps early (they freeze well) and defrost them the night before. Simplify as much as necessary. Try a new recipe this year, maybe chicken liver pâté from scratch, but if it's not absolutely fabulous then go back to buying it from the deli. Don't add extra work for no reason. Make this your new rule: If it's not fabulous, I'm not doing it. Try something new. Rid yourself of routines you're tired of, or that aren't working for you anymore.

5. Decorate cookies with children during the holiday season. If you don't have kids of your own, you can borrow some. Make sugar cookies covered with different coloured sparkles, silver balls, chocolate jimmies, squirts of icing. Or decorate gingerbread men with Smarties (M&M'S in the USA) and vanilla icing. You don't have to make the cookies from scratch if that's too much work -- you can decorate whatever you buy from the grocery store. The point is to have a yearly tradition with your kids, grandkids, nieces, or neighbours.

6. Buy yourself a food treat each year and try something new. I like to buy myself weird little cans of juice (guava?) or imported mints, and then I put them in my own stocking to open Christmas morning. It's a great time to explore. You can have a tiny food adventure for under \$5. Or invite your friends to share the tradition with you. One year Karen sent me sour watermelon candies which I ate one after the other until they were gone-gone-gone. I also like the mints we bought in Paris last year. Next time I go to Europe, I'll get two bags and hide them in the house for next Christmas. I'll get some for you too, if you like :)

7. Plan a super easy breakfast for Christmas morning. Mash up some frozen strawberries and mix with orange juice. Add champagne if you don't have to drive. Buy part-baked croissants and put them in the oven to have with your juice. Serve with homemade strawberry-rhubarb jam, a gift from Auntie Shelley. Christmas brunch on the west coast wouldn't be complete without Japanese mandarin oranges. On the east coast, it's Clementines. In Montreal, we have fresh pineapple from somewhere down-under."

"Bon appetit!"

Shelley MacDonald Beaulieu, Owner & Head Chef

www.oneroastchicken.com

Shelley MacDonald Beaulieu is the owner & head chef of the NEW at-home cooking website OneRoastChicken.com. She's has had a passion for cooking since she was 12 and discovered apple crisp in her Grade 7 home economics class. She has a Masters degree in Writing, training at L'Academie Culinaire. If you toss that in a blender with her Education degree, and her photography training ... you'll see that she brings a fresh perspective to the world of cooking.

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Wine Tips for Your Holidays

This month I am going to give you a few links to some wine sites. They are filled with great tips and suggestions – I especially like the ones on pairing wine and chocolate – yum. And remember to add some sparkling wines to your festivities. Add some new or old favorites – mulled wine, sparkling punch and Kir Royales. Go to these sites for great ideas:

<http://wine.about.com/od/holidayswithwine/a/Christmasdinner.htm>

<http://wine.about.com/od/winerecommendations/a/winechocolate.htm>

http://www.gourmetstationblog.typepad.com/my_weblog/2006/11/wine_suggestion.html

December Holidays

December 10 Human Rights Day

December 12 Gingerbread House Day

December 15 – 23 Chanukah

December 21 Winter Solstice

December 23 Festivus

December 25 Christmas

December 26 - January 1 Kwanzaa

December 28 - 29 National Chocolate Day (Two of them)

December 31 World Peace Meditation Day

December 31 New Year's Eve

Especially this month, please be sure to remember our service men and women. Bake some cookies for a veteran, active or retired, whom you may know in the neighborhood, just to say that they are not forgotten. And there are some wonderful organizations where you can 'adopt' a soldier. For example, www.soldiersangels.org is a truly worthwhile organization.

December Recipes

This recipe will delight kids, teenagers and adults. It is a no-bake, yummy confection that you can make ahead. Although this makes a lot of treats, they will virtually disappear. Make them on the smaller side – they are quite rich and just melt in your mouth.

Peanut Butter Balls

Makes 100 – 120 balls.

1- 28 oz jar of creamy peanut butter

1 stick butter

Melt in microwave for 2 minutes until melted. Stir and set aside.

Add to the peanut butter mix:
1 pound confectioner's sugar
3 Cups Rice Krispies.

Stir all ingredients until blended. A wooden spoon works the best. It will be somewhat stiff.

Line cookie sheets with wax or parchment paper. Dip a spoon or melon baller (smaller side) into the mix, roll between the palms of hands (you can rub these with butter first so it doesn't stick and it's good for your skin, too) until it forms a ball.

Place onto cookie sheet on parchment or wax paper. Chill until hardened.

Melt:

1/2 to 1 small package of Toll House morsels in microwave until just softened and spreadable (don't overheat or it will separate).

Dip tops of balls (1/2) into chocolate. Place back on cookie sheets. Refrigerate until hardened.

Store in airtight containers in a cold place.

Then just stuff you face and enjoy.

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Cream of Mushroom Soup

This is a very velvety soup – very satisfying and perfect for your holiday meal.

Serves 6

1 quart chicken broth(good quality canned or homemade)
1 pound fresh mushrooms, chopped coarsely. Use a mixture of Portabella, Cremini, Shitake, and dried porcini (reconstituted)
1-2 tablespoons Extra Virgin Olive Oil
4 tablespoons sweet onion, minced
6 tablespoons butter
6 tablespoons all-purpose flour
1/2 cup half-and-half plus reserve another
1/2 cup half and half if you prefer a more creamy soup
1/8 teaspoon paprika
Kosher salt and fresh ground pepper (white preferred) to taste
Fresh minced parsley for garnish

Sauté mushrooms and onions on medium heat until just golden – stirring frequently.

In a 2-quart pot, bring chicken broth to a boil, add mushrooms and onions, paprika, salt and pepper and bring back to a simmer. Reduce heat to a slow simmer and cover for 20-30 minutes. (Can be made ahead up to this point and stored, covered, in the refrigerator, for 2 – 3 days. Reheat before serving.)

In a separate medium pot, melt the butter on medium low heat, and then add the flour. Whisk constantly until evenly incorporated. Continue to whisk while slowly adding half-and-half to the roux. Stir constantly until the sauce is thickened and smooth.

Lower the heat on the soup. Add the mushroom broth to the roux slowly and stir until evenly incorporated. Add additional cream if desired. DO NOT boil after adding cream. Season with salt, pepper and parsley, to taste. Serve immediately.

Christmas Green Beans

Here is another recipe to help you with your holiday menu. It has been in our family for many years and we originally used canned green beans (oh, no). It is so easy and quick to make, you can't go wrong with red and green.

- 1 1/2 pounds fresh green beans, trimmed
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 (14 1/2-ounce to 16 ounce) can stewed tomatoes
- 3 pieces bacon (optional)
- 2 tablespoons fresh basil or parsley, finely chopped
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 2 ounces Feta Cheese crumbled (optional)

Cook the green beans in a large pot of boiling water until just tender, about 3 - 5 minutes. Drain and rinse in cold water. Drain well; set aside.

Cook bacon, if using, until crisp. Drain and crumble.

Melt the butter and oil in a large saucepan, over medium heat. Add the cooked green beans and sauté about 2 minutes. Add the tomatoes and cook until heated through, about 3 minutes. Stir in bacon, cheese, parsley or basil. Season with salt and pepper, to taste. Transfer to a serving bowl, and serve.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

The CONTEST CONTINUES –

Hey, out there – everyone must be too busy to win something. As of today, there were no entries for this easy contest. So get your information to me soon. What could be easier?

Last Chance: A New Simple, Little Contest

I always encourage people to be adventurous - try new recipes and spices and cuisines. So let me know what you have done this year that is beyond your usual comfort zone when it comes to food. What did you cook that was really different and how did others react to it? What new cuisine did you try? What is your new favorite spice and why?

There will be two prizes as an incentive for sharing your stories- one for the best recipe for cooking a different or unusual recipe or cuisine, and the second for the best story about a new or unusual meal you cooked and how everyone reacted to it.

The prize for each of the two winners is a \$15.00 gift-certificate each to Williams - Sonoma. Send me an email to enter – marybeth.gregg@verizon.net

Just a few contest rules-

- 1) Contest is void where prohibited by law. Subject to all federal, state and local laws and regs. - you know, the usual stuff.
- 2) Entries must be received via email by midnight, December 1, 2006
- 3) Entries will not be acknowledged or returned and your entry constitutes permission to edit, modify, publish and otherwise use the recipe in any way without compensation.
- 4) Prizes will be awarded no later than December 15h- unless I get swamped with entries so then give me one more week until December 22nd. Prizes will be sent to you via USPS. Your recipe will be featured in the next newsletter, with acknowledgement to you.

UPCOMING NEWS

A new format for the upcoming newsletters – stay tuned.

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

New cookbook reviews.

Food for Thought

<http://www.secondharvest.org>

America's Second Harvest Network is still responding to Hurricane Relief disaster and to others in need of basic food. Please give generously to this or your local Foodbank or other charity.

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.

Enjoy the best of season! Marybeth Gregg.

www.girlfriendsinthekitchen.com

Check in to this new website to see our new business venture – team building for groups using cooking as the team event: www.teamchefs.com

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 Newark Star Ledger, The Courier News, 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, and was featured in the PhillyWIT Chapter of WorldWIT Food and Fashion Expo in Philadelphia last fall.

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