

Food

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2004

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Branch Out

Forget Popcorn. Put Pasta, Pomegranates And Pastry on Your Tree

By LISA CHERKASKY
Special to The Washington Post

To me, decorating with food is always beautiful—and that's not just because I've been a food stylist for almost 20 years, or because people have decorated for the holidays with foodstuffs at least since the Middle Ages. The colors are natural and more subtle; the intensity of tone is dialed back from what you might find among store-bought ornaments.

You might think this sort of look—pale hues and organic shapes—would seem right only in an old-fashioned or a country-style house, but it all depends on what you do with food decorations and how much of them you use. My rooms are kind of spare, with “clean lines” and contemporary greens, orange and sapphire blue, so I don't overdue it with the Christmas froufrou. You can take something that looks rustic, and, by keeping it simple, make it modern.

The same techniques could be used to make Hanukkah or Kwanzaa decorations as well, because you could hang the ornaments on anything.

You can make most of the decorations you see here the night before, or you could start next year's batch in September; wrap them carefully in tissue, and they will keep from season to season. They might fade a bit, but that would be part of their charm. However, garlands made from cereal, bay leaves and juniper are best made fresh each year. And the pomegranates will keep if they dry before they get moldy and squishy.

If you don't want to save ornaments, it might be fun to put the simplest, non-glittery ones on a tree outside and let the critters go to town. You can always make more. That being said, so-called “edible decorations” are not to be eaten once you've glued, pinned and painted them. Hanging them at a height beyond the reach of pets and young children is also necessary.

These decorations make the best kind of gifts, created in my kitchen with things from my kitchen cupboards.

Lisa Cherkasky, who hauls out her beloved chain of tiny gingerbread men to decorate the mantle at Christmas, last wrote for Food about garnishes.

How-to Guide



TORTILLA SNOWFLAKES

Cut flour tortillas into 4-inch circles using pinking shears or other decorative cutting scissors. Cut holes using aspic cutters or a hole punch.

Place on a parchment- or Silpat-lined sheet pan and set an overturned cooling rack on top of tortillas to keep them flat. Bake at 200 degrees until hard and dry, about 30 minutes. Let cool completely.

Stamp designs on snowflakes using a cookie stamp and stamping colors, or you may dilute color pastes with a little water. It might be helpful to paint the color onto the stamp with a small brush. Or paint the snowflakes freehand with a small brush. Let dry. String with ribbon and hang.



POMEGRANATES

Paint with a product called dimensional fabric paint, which sits up from the surface a bit. Sprinkle with glitter. (I used a paint that had glitter already mixed in.) Using upholstery T-pins, stick the pins through some ribbon, then stick the pinned ribbon into the pomegranate and squeeze a little glue into the hole to affix it.

■ **MORE CLASSIC DECORATIONS from the kitchen, Page 2**



PHOTOS BY RENEE COMET/STYLED BY LISA CHERKASKY FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

For the Festival of Lights, A Different Kind of Pancake

By TINA WASSERMAN
Special to The Washington Post

A beautiful spy enters an enemy camp to seduce its evil general. After tempting him with salty cakes of cheese and a steady stream of wine to quench his thirst, she watches him fall into a drunken stupor. She slays him and his frightened troops retreat. Our heroine's people are saved.

This could be a movie pitch, but it is actually the lesser-known biblical story associated with the eight days of Hanukkah, which began at sundown Tuesday.

The Jewish holiday commemorates the rededication of the Temple in Israel after it was destroyed in 165 B.C. Many stories are associated with this holiday, but the most common one relates to the single vial of oil for the sacred candelabra that miraculously burned for eight days instead of one. That tale has been emphasized for centuries, and oil figures prominently in Hanukkah cooking to this day—most commonly in the fried potato pancakes called latkes that are a favorite during the holiday.

But many Jews also tell the story of Judith, a beautiful and pious widow who takes matters into



PHOTO BY RENEE COMET/STYLED BY LISA CHERKASKY FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Beyond potato latkes: A centuries-old tale of heroism is responsible for the cheese dishes, such as these lemon ricotta pancakes, on Hanukkah tables today.

See HANUKKAH, F5, Col. 1

FOOD 101

Robert L. Wolke

Clearing My Desk

As each year draws to a close, I think about certain annual chores I must do. Not that I do them, you understand; I think about them. Like filing all the year's tax-related papers where I will be able to find them at tax time. Like exchanging my winter and summer clothes between accessible and out-of-the-way locations. Like catching up on my e-mail.

I can procrastinate for the first two, but I do have newspaper deadlines to meet. If I'm going to use my



THE WASHINGTON POST

See WOLKE, F4, Col. 1

STAFF FAVORITES

Applesauce, Improved

An occasional series in which staff members share a recipe that we turn to time and again:

There are moments in a cook's life when you think You've Got It. Then reality sets in and elation turns to despair. You realize that some recipes just aren't worth the effort.

Take my first batch of homemade applesauce, which I tried about a year after I graduated from college. Craving the stuff of my childhood, I was inspired upon seeing a lavish spread of apple desserts in Martha Stewart Living.

The applesauce recipe was overwrought. It called for types of apples that I was unfamiliar with, spices that were beyond my means and quite a lot of fussing, tasting, covering, uncovering and guessing along the way. Chunky yet silken in texture and sweet but ever so slightly tart, the applesauce exceeded my already high expectations. But I had underestimated the time required for apple selecting, peeling, slicing, stirring and waiting. Ethereal but not exactly practical.

I tucked the recipe away and never forgot it, but never found the time for it after that. My

made-from-scratch applesauce had, however, ruined the jarred alternative for me.

My applesauce hiatus lasted almost a decade. Then this fall I happened upon a recipe for a mash of oven-roasted tart apples and sweet pears while flipping through the "Stonewall Kitchen Harvest," by Jim Stott, Jonathan King and Kathy Gunst (Clarkson Potter, 2004). There was still peeling to contend with, but minimal slicing and no constant tending. There was another lure, the fact that it brought together two compatible fruits. I contemplated the recipe daily for several weeks before I tried it, thinking that surely it couldn't be as memorable as the one I'd spent hours laboring over once before.

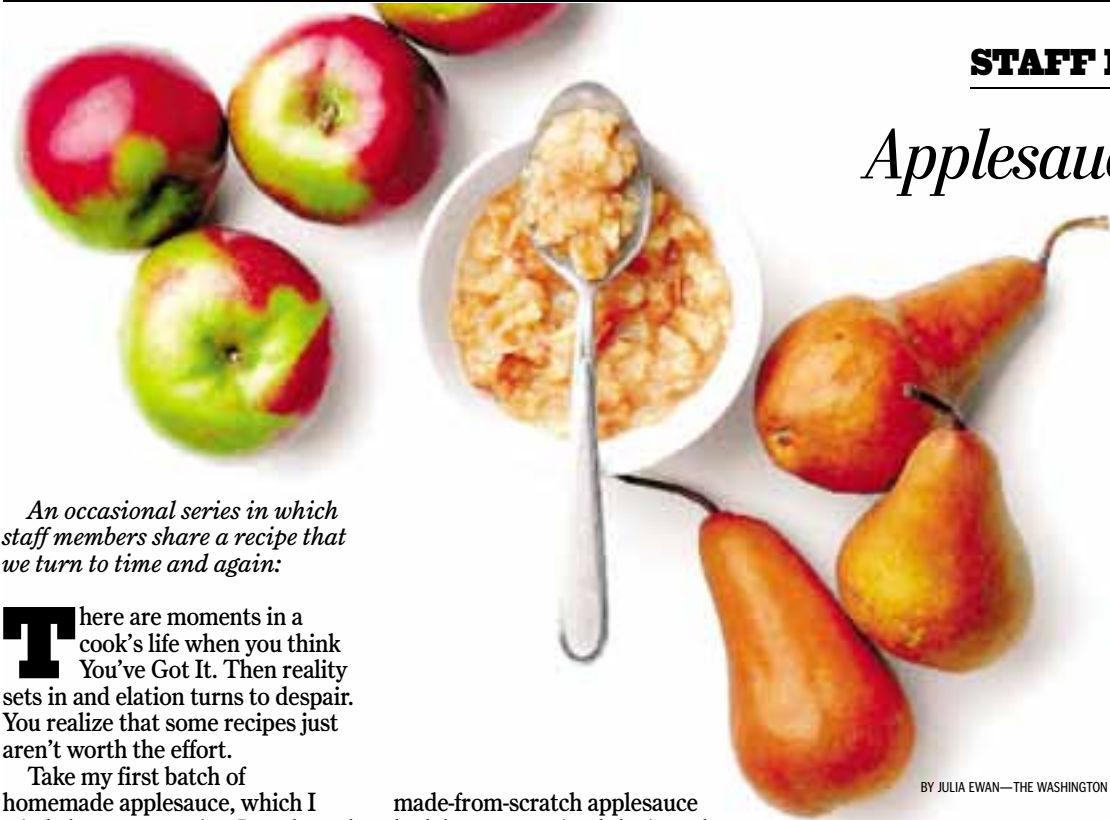
In fact, this one is better. And simpler.

Roasted Mashed Apple-Pear Sauce

Makes about 4 cups

The fruit comes out of the oven puffed slightly, steaming profusely and exuding juices sweet as nectar. The resulting mash comes together in a matter of seconds. The tartness of McIntosh apples melds seamlessly with the sweetness of Bosc pear.

Depending on the use of aromatics and arm power, the sauce may be made sweet or savory, smooth or chunky. All of the variations that follow are equally effortless and impressive. Purists may shudder, but swapping maple syrup for sugar quickly became my standard.



BY JULIA EWAN—THE WASHINGTON POST

8 McIntosh apples, peeled, cored and quartered
4 almost ripe Bosc pears, peeled, cored and quartered
3 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into small cubes
1/4 cup granulated sugar
Pinch salt

Place the oven rack in the middle position and preheat the oven to 400 degrees.

In a large roasting pan, toss the apples, pears, butter, sugar and salt together. Cover tightly with

foil. Roast for 25 minutes, uncovering to stir the fruit once or twice. (If you forget to stir or just get lazy, the sauce will still be okay.)

Uncover the pan and roast for another 5 to 10 minutes, until the fruit feels quite tender when tested with a small, sharp knife.

Remove the pan from the oven and, using a potato masher, mash the fruit to the desired consistency.

The applesauce will keep in a covered jar in the refrigerator for

several days.

Variations: Add the following ingredients before roasting:

1 tablespoon chopped ginger
1/4 teaspoon ground ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice or cardamom

1 tablespoon chopped fresh rosemary, sage and/or thyme
Maple syrup or brown sugar instead of white sugar

Per 1/2-cup serving: 180 calories, 1 gm protein, 35 gm carbohydrates, 5 gm fat, 12 mg cholesterol, 3 gm saturated fat, 36 mg sodium, 2 gm dietary fiber

—Renee Schettler

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More Decoration Directions

■ PASTRY SNOWFLAKES

Using the quarter-circle creases in a round of refrigerated prepared pie dough, separate the dough into four sections and cut a circle into each one with a pastry wheel or pinking shears. Make decorative cuts with aspic cutters or an Xacto knife.

Place on a parchment- or Silpat-lined sheet pan and bake at 250 degrees until crisp, 20 to 30 minutes. Let cool.

Brush lightly with corn syrup and sprinkle with edible glitter, sparkling sugar or tiny nonpareils. Let dry completely, about 2 hours. String with ribbon and hang.

■ SEEDBALLS

Stick small (2- to 3-inch) Styrofoam balls on wooden skewers. Put assorted seeds on paper plates or in pie dishes; cumin, fennel, mustard, poppy, sesame

and anise seeds all work well. Peppercorns are too big and too heavy. Coat the foam balls with tacky glue, then roll them in seeds, pressing the seeds into place. Add more glue if it is needed in spots and cover with seeds. Let dry completely.

Spray with metallic spray paint and/or spray glitter. Let dry and use spray varnish to finish.

String with ribbon using sequin pins and hot glue. Hang.

■ GARLANDS

String small pretzels, LifeSavers, small pasta shapes with holes such as wagon wheels, or cereal such as Froot Loops onto thin ribbon.

To string gummy bears or other soft candies such as

Swedish fish, you will need a sharp, relatively heavy sewing needle and fishing line or colored copper wire. Oiling the needle lightly helps it slip through sticky things more easily.

String bay leaves and juniper berries with a sharp, thin needle onto fishing line or metallic thread.

—Lisa Cherkasky

Sources

Cookie stamps and colors

Michaels arts and crafts stores, Total Crafts and Pearl Art & Crafts stores; locations in the Washington area; see www.pearlpaint.com, www.totalcrafts.com, www.acmoore.com, www.michaels.com.

Cookie and aspic (tiny) cutters

La Cuisine, 323 Cameron St., Alexandria, call 703-836-4435 or see www.lacuisine.com; Sur La Table, area locations; see www.surlatable.com. Williams-Sonoma, area locations; see www.williams-sonoma.com.

Decorative cutter scissors

A. C. Moore (Fairfax, Baileys Crossroads and Rockville locations)

Edible glitter, sparkling sugar, nonpareils

La Cuisine (see info above), The Little Bitts Shop, 11246 Triangle Lane, Wheaton; call 301-933-2733; Fran's Cake and Candy Supplies, Courthouse Plaza, 10396 Willard Way, Fairfax; call 703-352-1471.

—Lisa Cherkasky



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Every day deserves a great finish.

