

New Zealand Holly Cookies

This cookie won the grand prize in our 2012 Holiday Cookie Contest. From Erin Czmiel of Cary.

2 cups all-purpose flour

1 cup sugar

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

3/4 teaspoon baking powder

1/4 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, or 8 tablespoons

1 slightly beaten egg

1/4 cup milk, plus 2 to 3 tablespoons, divided

2 cups sifted powdered sugar

1/2 teaspoon vanilla

Green and red food coloring

2/3 cup raspberry jam

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Combine flour, sugar, cinnamon, baking powder and salt in a medium mixing bowl. Use two butter knives or a pastry cutter to cut butter into the flour mixture until size of small peas. Make a well in the center. Combine egg and 1/4 cup milk; add all at once to the flour-butter mixture. Stir until moistened.

Roll dough to 1/8-inch thickness on a lightly floured surface. Use 2-inch round or star cookie cutter to cut dough. Place on ungreased cookie sheet. Bake for 8 to 10 minutes or until the bottom is brown. Cool on a wire rack.

Place about 1/2 teaspoon raspberry jam on bottom of cookie and top with another cookie. Repeat with remaining cookies.

Stir powdered sugar, vanilla and 2 to 3 tablespoons milk in a small bowl to create a glaze. Spread on top of each sandwich cookie. Use a paintbrush to paint a few holly leaves and a stem with the green food coloring and holly berries with the red food coloring.

Yield: about 45 sandwich cookies

Maple Pecan Bacon Brittle

This recipe was the grand prize winner in our 2013 Holiday Treat Recipe Contest. From James Mullins of Hampton Roads, Va.

8 slices bacon, such as Neese's

1 cup sugar

1/4 cup light corn syrup

1/4 cup maple syrup

1/4 cup water

1/2 teaspoon salt

1 1/2 cups chopped pecans

2 tablespoons unsalted butter or margarine, softened (used unsalted butter)

1 teaspoon baking soda

Line a medium or large baking sheet with parchment paper. Set aside.

Cook bacon until crisp and drain on paper towels. Chop finely and reserve.

Combine sugar, corn syrup, maple syrup, water and salt in a deep-sided 3-quart saucepan. Cook over medium heat until sugar is dissolved, about 10-12 minutes. Fold in pecans and turn heat up to medium-high. Continue cooking, stirring occasionally, until the mixture reaches 300°F on a candy thermometer, about 10-13 minutes.

Remove pot from the heat and stir in reserved bacon, butter or margarine and baking soda until well mixed.

Pour mixture onto prepared baking sheet and spread as thinly as possible with a heat-proof spatula. Let cool until hardened, about 30 minutes. Break into pieces to serve.

Yield: 12-18 servings.

Salted Whiskey Caramels

The grand prize-winning recipe in the 2014 Holiday Treat Recipe Contest. From Gina Bowman of Raleigh.

5 tablespoons unsalted 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.