

Celebrate the season without sacrificing health

By Barbara Quinn
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As I write this column, I'm looking out on snow-covered hills listening to "White Christmas" on the radio. Not that I'm even near ready for the holiday. Until yesterday, I still had pumpkins and Thanksgiving turkeys all over the house.

Maybe that's not so bad. Recent travel and other commitments have forced me to look at this Christmas season with more ... simplicity. So this year, I will be content to give simpler gifts and prepare uncomplicated dishes in order to better concentrate on the richness of family and friends.

Still, it's the holiday, right? Here are some festive yet simple indulgences that can also be healthful ... with a few precautions:

Entertain nuts. And not just your relatives. Tree nuts like almonds, cashews, hazelnuts, pecans, pistachios and walnuts are one of our best food groups to reduce total and "bad" LDL cholesterol, according to a recent analysis of these perfect holiday snacks. Tree nuts are high in healthful mono- and polyunsaturated fats, the type we are called to eat in place of more saturated fats. Set them out for



Dreamtime/TNS

Set nuts out for holiday party munchers and use in recipes for an extra boost of healthful fiber, protein and fat.

holiday party munchers and use in recipes for an extra boost of healthful fiber, protein and fat. And who says fun dessert recipes can't also be good for us? I'm going to make this goodie with my grandkids this year:

Walnut Chocolate Bliss Balls from the California walnut growers (www.walnuts.org). Every recipe I've tried from this site has been top notch. Christmas guacamole. Avocados supply more than a creamy

opulent taste. They are also rich in healthful monounsaturated fats, the same kind we get in olive oil. And they are the right color for Christmas, especially if you serve them along with fresh red salsa. Hint: If you want

to give me a gift, get the fresh guacamole recipe from Chef Gabe at Pescadero Restaurant

in Carmel-by-the-Sea and share it with me.

Colorful sides. Brighten your holiday ham or other main dish with red and green fruits and vegetables. Remember when you add a variety of colors and textures to your plate, you enrich your health with a diversity of heart-protecting, cancer-fighting, obesity-preventing substances.

And then there's eggnog... Ever notice that we can only buy this indulgent egg, milk and sugar concoction during the holidays? There's a reason for that. If I had access to it year-round I would be very round indeed. We can enjoy this holiday treat like we sip a fine wine...slowly and delicately.

Decorate a gingerbread house with your grandkids. Even if they eat more of the decorative frosting and candy than they put on their creation. The memories will last longer than the sugar.

May you enjoy these holy days of Christmas!

Barbara Quinn is a registered dietitian nutritionist.

HANUKKAH

Continued from Page 3B

Line a large plate with two layers of paper towel. In a large saucepan, heat 2 inches vegetable oil over medium heat. Gently slip the turnovers into the hot oil in batches of 4 or 5 and fry until golden brown, flipping once halfway through, 4 to 5 minutes. Transfer the fried sambusak to the paper towels to drain.

Nutrition information per each of 24: 210 calories, 6 g fat, 310 mg sodium, 11 g carbohydrates, 4 g saturated fat, 0 g added sugars, 5 g protein, 40 mg cholesterol, 0 g dietary fiber
Exchanges per serving: 1 starch, 1 fat.

BIMUELOS (CARDAMOM-SUGAR FRITTERS)

Serves 6.

Note: From "Little Book of Jewish Sweets," by Leah Koenig.

2¼ teaspoons active dry yeast
¼ cup plus 1 teaspoon sugar, divided
¾ cup warm water
3 to 4 cups flour
½ teaspoon ground cardamom
½ teaspoon kosher salt
2 large egg yolks
¼ cup milk or almond milk
½ teaspoon vanilla extract
Vegetable oil for frying
Cardamom Sugar:
1 cup sugar
1½ teaspoons ground cardamom
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

Stir together the yeast, 1 tsp. of the sugar, and the warm water in a large bowl, and let sit until bubbling and frothy, 5 to 10 minutes. Meanwhile, whisk together 3 cups of the flour, the remaining ¼ cup sugar, the cardamom, and salt in a separate bowl. Stir the egg yolks, milk and vanilla into the yeast mixture. Add the flour mixture in two additions, stir-

ring until the dough begins to come together.

Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and knead, adding up to 1 cup of flour, a little at a time, until the dough is smooth and supple, 5 to 10 minutes. (You may not need all of the flour.) The kneading can also be done in a stand mixer fitted with a dough hook for 5 to 7 minutes.

Rub about 1 tsp. of vegetable oil around the large bowl; place the dough in the bowl and turn to coat. Cover the bowl with a kitchen towel and let the dough sit in a warm place until doubled in size, about 1 ½ hours.

Line a large plate with paper towels. Add oil to a medium saucepan until it's about 1 ½ inches deep and set the pan over the medium heat until the temperature reaches 365 on a candy or deep-frying thermometer. Working in batches of five or six, pinch off walnut-size pieces of dough, roll each into a ball shape, and drop into the hot oil. Fry, flipping once, until puffed, golden and cooked

through, 2 to 4 minutes total. Transfer with a slotted spoon to the prepared plate to drain.

Make the cardamom sugar: Stir together the sugar, cardamom and cinnamon in a large bowl. Working in batches, add the warm bimuelos to the mixture and toss to coat. Serve immediately.

Nutrition information per serving: 540 calories, 21 g fat, 170 mg sodium, 81 g carbohydrates, 4 g saturated fat, 31 g added sugars, 8 g protein, 60 mg cholesterol, 3 g dietary fiber
Exchanges per serving: 3 starch, 2 ½ carb, 3 ½ fat.

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CHRISTMAS

Continued from Page 1B

CHERRY BARS

Prep: 20 minutes
Bake: 30 minutes
Makes: 36 small bar cookies

Base:
½ cup all-purpose flour
¼ teaspoon baking soda
1/8 teaspoon salt
½ cup firmly packed light brown sugar
1 cup uncooked old-fashioned oats
1 stick (½ cup) unsalted butter, melted

Topping:
2 large eggs
¾ cup granulated sugar
¾ cup roughly chopped, well-drained, maraschino cherries
½ cup flaked sweetened shredded coconut
½ cup chopped pecans or walnuts
¼ cup all-purpose flour
½ teaspoon baking powder
¼ teaspoon salt

1. Heat oven to 350 degrees. Have a 9-inch square baking pan ready.
2. For base, mix flour, baking soda and salt in medium bowl. Stir in brown sugar, oats and melted butter until well-mixed. Press the mixture over the bottom of the pan into a compact, even layer.
3. For topping, beat the eggs in the now-empty bowl. Add sugar and mix well. Add remaining ingredients. Mix well. Spread topping in an even

layer over the base in the pan. Bake until top is golden and edges have pulled away from the sides of the pan, about 30 minutes. Cool on wire rack. Cut into small squares. Store in a covered tin.

Nutrition information per bar: 95 calories, 5 g fat, 2 g saturated fat, 17 mg cholesterol, 13 g carbohydrates, 9 g sugar, 1 g protein, 48 mg sodium, 1 g fiber

PEPPERMINT MOCHA BROWNIES

Prep: 20 minutes
Bake: 35 minutes
Makes: 3 dozen small brownies

8 ounces unsweetened chocolate, coarsely chopped
1 stick (½ cup) plus 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
2 cups granulated sugar
4 large eggs, lightly beaten
2 tablespoons instant espresso powder
2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
1/8 teaspoon salt
1 cup all-purpose flour
1 bag (11 ounces) white baking chips, such as Ghirardelli
½ cup roughly crushed peppermint candy or candy canes
½ cup powdered sugar
About 2 tablespoons half-and-half or milk

1. Heat oven to 350 degrees. Line the inside of a 13-by-9-inch metal baking pan with

heavy-duty foil. Lightly grease the foil.

2. Put the chopped chocolate and butter into a large, heavy-bottomed saucepan. Melt over very low heat, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, until smooth. Remove from heat.

3. Stir in granulated sugar until incorporated. Then stir in eggs, espresso powder, vanilla and salt until smooth. Stir in flour just until incorporated. Gently fold in white baking chips.

4. Spread batter in prepared pan. Bake until center is just set, but not at all dry, about 30 minutes. Sprinkle with the crushed peppermint candy and gently pat it into the top of the brownies. Bake until candy just starts to soften, 3 to 5 minutes. Cool completely in the pan on a wire rack.

5. Pour powdered sugar into a small bowl and drizzle in just enough half-and-half to make a smooth, pourable glaze about the thickness of honey. Use a fork to swirl the sugar glaze over the brownies in an interesting pattern. Let stand until glaze sets, at least 1 hour.

6. To cut, use the foil to lift brownies out of the pan. Set on a large cutting board, then carefully pull the foil away from the brownies. Cut with a large knife into small squares. Store in an airtight container for several days.

Nutrition information per bar: 194 calories, 10 g fat, 6 g saturated fat, 31 mg cholesterol, 24 g carbohydrates, 20 g sugar, 3 g protein, 27 mg sodium, 1 g fiber

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