



AND SO IT GROWS

CHRIS COLLINS

Praise for pies makes fine present at Christmas

My family members presented me with a gift this Christmas that I will always treasure.

It was their delight in the two huckleberry pies I baked on the Saturday morning after Christmas at my mom's house.

Not one person had one bad thing to say about those pies. (Oh, my mom added a little bit more sugar to her small piece, but I didn't mind. I wanted her to enjoy it to her heart's delight, and she did — with just a little more sugar.)

But from the rest of the gang, not one complaint was issued. My brother, who is a good cook, even gave the pies his nod of approval. That made me especially happy. He's usually more critical than the rest of the huckleberry connoisseurs I was serving.

But not this Christmas. He had nothing but praise for my efforts.

I was so happy and proud and felt the true joy of sharing something very special to me with those I treasure much more.

And, of course, the story and the pie planning began way before Christmas. The first pint of berries came to us this summer from our generous neighbors who've also shared other bounties of nature with us, along with laughs and friendship, over the years.

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BOB'S THOUGHTS

BOB BAUM

The 2 best football games I saw

The NFL playoffs are underway, so it's a good time to pry open my rusty memory banks and talk about the two best pro football games I witnessed in nearly two decades covering the sport.

Both involved the Arizona Cardinals and Green Bay Packers. Both were playoff games. Both went to overtime. Both were won by Arizona.

The Cardinals and Packers are two of the original NFL franchises. The Packers stayed in Green Bay and flourished, the Cardinals drifted from Chicago to St. Louis to Arizona.

While the Packers have achieved legendary success, the Cardinals have been mostly bottom feeders. From 1984 through 2007 they had one winning season. Before their unlikely run to the 2009 Super Bowl, they had won a single playoff game (in 1998) since capturing the NFL title in 1947.

I covered the Cardinals every season for 19 years, through 2018, so I saw a lot of very bad football.

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Indulge Your Chocolate Obsession



E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune-TNS

Use a serrated knife to shave the chocolate bar into thin pieces. This will make the chocolate melt more quickly when you pour the hot cream over it.

TALKING TRUFFLES

By James P. DeWan
Chicago Tribune

Don't get me wrong: I am not — repeat: NOT — saying that if you don't like chocolate, there's something wrong with you, that maybe you are not from this planet (Earth). Perish the thought.

On another topic, quick question: Is it possible there are actual aliens from another world living among us disguised as humans? I think that's a reasonable proposition. Remember the scene in that Abbott and Costello movie where the gorilla is trying to wake up Lou Costello and you're thinking, "Wait, is that a real gorilla, or just a guy in a gorilla suit?" Hard to say. Maybe if you offered him a banana you could tell: guy or gorilla?

Like offering someone a chocolate truffle: human or alien?

Speaking of truffles ...

Why you need to learn this

O, the weather outside is frightful. Cruel death lurks 'round every corner. And you're not getting any younger. Have a truffle, for God's sake. You'll feel better.

If you're not an alien, that is.

The steps you take

Truffles are made from that wonderful brown goo the kids like to call "ganache." Rhymes with "panache." Ganache is chocolate melted with heavy cream. If that sounds rich and delicious, no need to show me your Earth I.D. card. You've probably eaten ganache in a thousand cakes.

Or a billion truffles, because truffles are simply small balls of ganache. Sometimes they're enhanced with bold flavors like espresso or booze, and usually they're coated with something like crushed nuts or those little sprinkly things your mom would put on cookies. Because truffles can be messy, that coating prevents your hands from getting all chocolatey as you gorge yourself like a dingo

in an abattoir.

Because of the truffle's paucity of ingredients, my advice is to start with a bar of high quality dark chocolate, something in the 60% to 70% cacao range.

As for the cream, the thing you want to pay attention to is ratios. Ganache comes in different thicknesses, like lenses at the optometrist. For truffles, you want a fairly stiff ganache, roughly a 2 to 1 ratio of chocolate to cream. If you're flavoring your truffles, figure about an ounce of booze or a teaspoon of extract per cup of cream.

To make ganache, bring your cream to a simmer in a small saucepan. While it heats, turn your chocolate bar into little shards: Using a serrated knife, such as a bread knife, shave off thin slices and the chocolate will crumble into bits like a desiccated mummy — just what you want. When you've got enough, give the chocolatey pile a few more chops to reduce the size of the pieces even further. Do this part with a chef's knife, as you can rock its curved blade over the chocolate like you're mincing garlic.

Next, grab a metal mixing bowl. Make sure

it's dry as a lunar plain, because water can make melting chocolate seize up like an oil-starved V6. Put your chocolate into the bowl and dump in the hot cream, letting it sit for several seconds to start the chocolate melting.

To combine the cream and chocolate, don't use a whisk; use a rubber spatula. Stir in small circles from the inside out, working the chocolate into the cream to form a smooth and silky pond of delight. This is ganache.

Here's a thing: It's possible the diminishing heat from your cooling cream will not be enough to complete the meltification process. If that happens, make a bain marie: Bring about 2 inches of water to a boil in a saucepan, then reduce the heat to low. Place your bowl of creamy choco-lumps on top, taking care not to get any water into the bowl. (Should this happen and your chocolate seizes, mix in a little boiling water and it should turn liquid again.) Continue stirring over the steam until the aforementioned pond is achieved.

At this point, you have a decision to make: Melon baller or piping bag?

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E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune-TNS

Roll the truffles in the coating of your choice, maybe cocoa powder, granulated sugar, sprinkles or nuts.

Beautiful bouquets don't require the freshest flowers

Any time you take a drive into the countryside, you can't help noticing dried weeds and grasses in fields and alongside the road.

Since they have had plenty of time to dry, they're all collectible. No one minds if you collect weeds and dry grass, although if there is a beautiful weed on private property it is proper to ask the landowner before



BETWEEN THE ROWS

WENDY SCHMIDT

cutting.

Dried bouquets of teasel, Queen Anne's lace, sea oats, wheat, oats,

bluestem or gamma grass, dock or mullein seed stalks all look great on your mantel or as a centerpiece on the dining table.

Don't forget grapevine wreaths. The wreaths can be embellished with teasel weeds or cones of pine, fir or spruce, or other weeds, leaves, moss or interesting pieces of wood. Driftwood, for instance.

Make your dried arrangement in a vase. For smaller containers, start by putting a piece of styrofoam or florist foam in the bottom first — then stick the stems into the foam to hold them in place.

Metallic or colored paint or clearcoat lacquer can enhance all or parts of the bouquet.

Some weeds have stickers, so gloves

are advised. Most of them don't break where you want them to, so take pruners or scissors just in case.

If you're like me, you enjoy interesting things and making beauty with very little expense.

If you have garden questions or comments, please write to green.gardencolumn@yahoo.com. Thanks for reading!