

PINTEREST CHALLENGE

For the second year, your Itemizer-ObsERVER newsroom tackled a bake-off

By Lukas Eggen

Who could mess up Rice Krispie treats?

Those were the words said to me when I told my “advisor” about the newsroom baking challenge.

It’s a recipe that, in theory, should be fool proof.

I would certainly test that.

Yes, I’m aware there is no baking involved in making Rice Krispie treats. But hey, last year I made brownies from a box ... so cut me some slack here. At least these would be from scratch. Sometimes it’s the small victories that matter.

Pinterest gave me the idea for reindeer Rice Krispie treats. I followed the link and look! There were photos of parents and kids making these. How hard could this be?

I mixed the butter and marshmallows together, poured in the rice krispies and stirred it all together.

So far, so good.

Mistake No. 1 — It’s hard to get rice krispie treat batter even in a pan. My initial attempt looked roughly like the equivalent of a 3-D topographical map of the Rocky Mountains.

I eventually got it smoothed out (sort of) and waited for the rice krispies to cool down and harden.

Then the real battle began.

Mistake No. 2 — you’d figure one day I would learn that I’m about as talented of an artist as I was when I was 5.

And I was no savant then.

But this truly seemed simple. A red M & M for the nose and green ones (in place of edible eyes) for the eyes. Chocolate frosting to draw the antlers. Popsicle sticks for looks and to pick them up without getting your hands sticky. I got this.

Then, reality set in and my ... amazing ... artistic skills kicked in.

The first one I did I put the nose and eyes too high up. The next one, they were too far apart. The “antlers” looked like eyebrows that grew vertically instead of horizontally.

I felt lied to. The family in the photos online were all smiling at perfectly done reindeer.

I was getting frustrated at mine that looked like they were done during an earthquake with one eye covered. Either that family had the steadiest hands in the history of families, or Pinterest lured me into a false sense of security.

My “reindeers” looked like well, I’m not exactly sure. Perhaps demented elves? Crazy Christmas mutants?

But all was not lost. A coworker’s child told me the Rice Krispie treats were “really good.”

I’ll take that as a win.

And hey, I made something from scratch, which is a step forward (I think).

At this point, I’m like two steps away from opening my own bakery.

By Jolene Guzman

Who could resist a Santa hat brownie?



LUKAS EGGEN/Itemizer-ObsERVER

The final result looked less like a group of reindeer and more like Christmas mutants.

Not me, so when the three of us in the *I-O* newsroom decided to do a “Pinterest Challenge” baking contest, the adorable little sweets were my immediate choice.

Of the several recipes on Pinterest, I picked the easiest — whipped cream instead of buttercream frosting. I’m not much of a baker outside of a few favorite recipes, so making the frosting required cooking tools I’m not familiar with (stand mixers, double boilers, what is this strange language?). Whipped cream? Now that’s easy.

In the spirit of competition (that I do have), I needed to increase the level of difficulty. I decided to find a from-scratch brownie recipe.

The result was chocolatey goodness. I did have to bake them much longer than the recipe called for, I think because I used a smaller pan than I should have, making the brownies thicker.

No matter, I like fudgy brownies better than cakey brownies anyway.

Once out of the oven, I confronted a different problem.

I wanted the brownies to be round to match the Pinterest picture. The lesson here is I should have used a mini cupcake pan, but apparently improvising is more fun for me.

My solution was to use a shot glass — no, not for what you are thinking — but like a cookie cutter. It wasted a lot of brownies, but got the job done. Don’t worry, the leftovers won’t really go to waste.

Another lesson: let the brownies cool thoroughly before adding whipped cream. A few minutes after transforming the brownies into cute little Santa hats with whipped cream and strawberries, they were melting. (Did I mention I don’t bake that often?)

Flavor-wise, I’m quite pleased with my creation. I was lucky enough to find out-of-season strawberries that were red and didn’t taste bland. The brownies were delicious — I may never use box brownie mix



PINTEREST/Itemizer-ObsERVER

Pinterest said making these would be a simple and easy activity the whole family could enjoy.

again — and the combination of chocolate, strawberries and whipped cream is, in a word, yummy.

One last suggestion: This recipe is probably best made on the day you plan to serve it. The Santa hats are easy to topple over and the cute presentation is ruined if that happens too much.

By Emily Mentzer

Ugh, Pinterest. It’s a blessing and a curse.

Last year, the newsroom did a bakeoff, writing columns and sharing pictures of our successes (failures) in the kitchen. This year, readers requested we pull ideas specifically from the website Pinterest, where

millions of photos of perfect, Martha Stewart-like crafts and recipes (and anything else you want to find) are all lined up to make you feel inferior.

I spent some time last week browsing the site, looking for something new and interesting, something challenging, but not impossible. The most frustrating thing wasn’t the perfection presented, but finding the right thing to click on to get to the actual recipe and instructions.

I settled on English toffee. Making candy of any kind is not easy for me and rarely turns out. But this recipe promised to be easy. In fact, the instructions say, “My family starts whipping up



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According to Pinterest, this toffee is so good, you can’t keep enough of it around the house during the holidays.



EMILY MENTZER/Itemizer-ObsERVER

My first attempt at toffee resulted in a burnt mess.



EMILY MENTZER/Itemizer-ObsERVER

It’s nearly the right color now — just a few moments longer.



EMILY MENTZER/Itemizer-ObsERVER

Second pound of butter later, and it’s at least photo worthy.

batches the day after Thanksgiving.” Sounds easy, right?

I put together the ingredients and found my candy thermometer. OK, easy.

I read the directions — and my classic dyslexia kicked in. “Heat to 305,” the recipe said. My eyes were certain that said “heat to 350.”

Needless to say my first batch was black. It smelled terrible. The only reason it did not set off our smoke alarm was because my husband is well-trained at opening windows and quickly airing out the kitchen.

My pan was burnt, too. One pound of butter wasted.

Well, there were no rules about do-overs, it just meant risking another pound of butter.

My friend said, “Butter is on sale this time of year anyway. Support your dairy farmers.”

So I set off to make a second batch, this time remembering to heat to 305 (hard crack), not a scorching 350.

I watched carefully. I didn’t even leave the kitchen until it reached 305. It still looked a little light in color, but I thought, better pull it now. I was probably a little

worried about overdoing it like the last batch. Once it cooled and was covered in chocolate and toasted almond slices, I realized I’d undercooked it by about five minutes — maybe less.

(After speaking with more candy-skilled co-workers, it may have helped if I’d put the toffee in the refrigerator to cool. Apparently toffee is very sensitive to heat.)

It’s chewy toffee, lacking the crunch of English toffee. The recipe says to break it apart with your hands — this is impossible with my toffee. It just bends, and then the chocolate layer on top falls off, leaving naked, brown toffee sitting there sadly.

It’s not a complete waste, as the flavor is good, but beware false teeth, crowns or fillings. You may lose some if you eat this batch of toffee.

The good thing is it got me to break out of my baking shell and use my candy thermometer again. That thing had been hidden away in a drawer for five years, unused.

I will try toffee again, but I will not likely search Pinterest for recipes anymore. I have enough interesting cookbooks on my shelves at home to choose challenging and new recipes.



PINTEREST/Itemizer-ObsERVER

Who could resist such a lovely little treat at the holidays?



JOLENE GUZMAN/Itemizer-ObsERVER

Santa hats melted just a bit after being placed.