

Homemade holiday

Appealing gifts that are edible, drinkable and easy to make

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Whether it's the grim economy or merely the vagaries of fashion, handmade gifts are trendy this season.

In a recent poll conducted by Michaels Stores Inc., 58 percent of more than 1,000 respondents said they'd be more likely to craft their own holiday gifts this year than last.

Food-gift orders are up, too, according to Larry Wagener, president of Entrees to Excellence Inc., a food-and-wine gift company in far southwest suburban Shorewood, where gourmet orders are up 19 percent from last year.

"Electronic items and trinkets don't seem to be as meaningful this season as food," Wagener says. "Americans need comfort these days, and food equates to comfort."

Market research firm NPD Group reports that more than half of all holiday gift givers say they're giving food, most frequently candies and cookies.

Of course, even with food gifts, there are fashions. Cookies will never go out of style -- they are the No. 1 snack eaten during the holidays, according to NPD -- yet fruitcakes and plum puddings, staples of the Dickensian era, have long since fallen out of favor.

Twenty or 30 years ago, cakes baked in jars were a fixture under many Christmas trees, while more recently, jars full of layered mixes and flavored vinegars and oils were big.

There's still time to make unique holiday food gifts. Personalized baskets of prepared foods are fast and easy to put together. You also can make some quick-to-fix homemade items and package them creatively, or mix homemade and store-bought items. Here are a few ideas.

Stick to a theme

"Be specific in your gift-basket offerings, so that the intention of use is clear," says Steve McDonagh of Chicago's Hearty Boys Catering. "Adding sweets, wine openers, coasters, after-dinner liquors, etc. make the basket a bit of a jumble sale."

Liz Sarnik, executive assistant at Lincolnwood-based caterers Food For Thought Enterprises, which makes hundreds of gift baskets each year, suggests selecting a theme.

You might pick an ethnic concept like Italian or Mexican, or choose a particular flavor. For example, Waukegan's [Nielsen-Massey Vanillas](#) has a new cookbook, *A Century of Flavor*, with loads of ideas for vanilla-flavored gifts, from vanilla caramel corn crunch to vanilla maple syrup.

One year, the Food For Thought theme was "Winter White." Baskets included a white porcelain mortar and pestle, white peppercorns, sea salt, white-truffle flour, garlic and homemade marshmallows.

Drinkable gifts

Beverages are popular gifts. Fernando Beteta, sommelier of NoMI in the Park Hyatt hotel, makes gluhwein, spiced mulled wine, which he calls "CRUsmas Wine."

Jennifer Bingham, wine director at Eno at the InterContinental Chicago, suggests a novel use for mini-liquor bottles (airplane size, available at large liquor stores) or splits of wine or champagne: Turn them into ornaments by using recycled newspaper, wrapping paper, and/or other decorating materials to spruce them up. A set of these also would make a nice gift, perhaps piled into a cocktail glass or shaker.

Melissa Joy Dobbins, a registered dietitian with the Midwest Dairy Council, likes to give "Latte Lovers" gift packs -- flavored syrups paired with a milk frother. She also packs up the ingredients for spiced hot chocolate. Wilton Enterprises in Woodridge makes that even easier with a recipe including dry milk, so the recipient need only add water.