

New England Chefs Give Back • Bargain Bubblics

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heirloom cranberries*



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celebrate
THE HOLIDAYS
IN "AMERICA'S
FOODIEST TOWN"

**HOST
A HOLIDAY
Dessert party**

...cakes, brownies, cookies and more!

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1st
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Gift Guide

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*How Sweet it is:
Host a Holiday Dessert Party*



IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR an alternative to typical holiday entertaining, think about inviting friends over for a decadent dessert bash. In the season of sugar plums and candy canes, what better way to celebrate than with an evening of luscious treats?

We talked with some of the region's finest bakers, gourmet shop owners, and celebrity chefs to get their ideas on how to create a dessert party that was easy, elegant, and fun. With these suggestions, you can do some of the baking yourself, pick up truly decadent items from your local bakery, or a little of both. Add a special cocktail or sparkling wine, and you've got a simple, stress-free party.

BY CRYSTAL WARD KENT | PHOTOGRAPHS BY TONY SCARPETTA



Classic Yule Log
decorated by Stephen James,
Popovers on the Square,
Portsmouth, New Hampshire



Temptation from the Bakery

Stephen James, managing partner of Popovers on the Square in downtown Portsmouth, New Hampshire, says he can't imagine a holiday party without a Yule log. "It's a classic treat with fudge icing, a jelly roll-type cake, butter cream frosting, and often a raspberry filling," he says. "Yule logs are beautifully decorated with marzipan leaves, pine cones, mushrooms, and sometimes animals or fanciful forest figures. They look lovely on the table, and anything chocolate is always popular."

Also popular and sure to create a beautiful presentation, *stollen*, traditional German holiday bread, is a rich loaf, folded into an oval, filled with dried fruit, and topped with confectioners' sugar icing and candied cherries.

"When we first made *stollen* for Christmas, we made them five to ten days out," says James. "Now we have to take orders 25 days ahead! People love them for parties, brunch, or even hostess gifts."

James also recommends rounding out your party offerings with platters of Christmas cookies and candies. "I suggest making some of your family favorites, then supplementing them with decorated shortbread cookies in holiday shapes, or our snowflake cookies. We also make peanut brittle for the holidays, which is about as American a candy as you can get, and chocolate raspberry cups — chocolate cups filled with seedless raspberry jam and chocolate ganache, then topped with a fresh raspberry. They are just the size that make you want another — and another!"

And you can't go wrong with a selection of tempting and gorgeous cakes. Among the holiday favorites, the Red Velvet Cake with its festive color and rich cream cheese icing, was the

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signature dessert at the Waldorf Astoria in New York City in the 1920s, and it's making a comeback. Sonja Swanberg baker/co-owner of Scratch Baking Co. in Portland, Maine, offers a snowy white coconut cake, (essence of winter wonderland) and an amazing chocolate layer cake that is sure to have guests drooling with anticipation, with its six layers of cake and six of apricot and chocolate ganache.

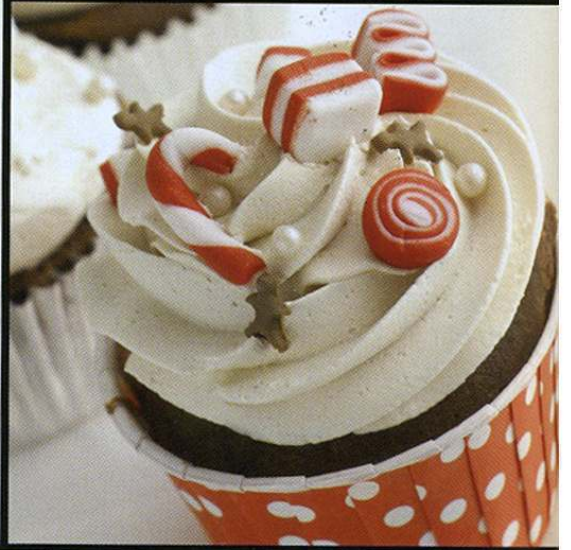
"It's a marvelous combination," says Swanberg. For a fun and festive platter, put out plates of Scratch's peppermint ring dings, which are sure to bring out the kid in everyone, along with some exotic cupcakes.

At the Wild Orchid Baking Company in North Hampton, New Hampshire, it's all about the cupcakes. Wild Orchid was voted Best Cupcakes in New Hampshire 2010 by the readers of *New Hampshire Magazine*, and their stunning and tasty creations clearly show why.

"Cupcakes are very much in vogue right now," says Erin Gardner, pastry chef and owner. "They are an easy way to offer your guests numerous flavor choices, and provide a range of



Traditional Stollen by
Stephen James, Popovers
on the Square, Portsmouth,
New Hampshire



Cupcakes and mini cakes by Wild Orchid Bakery, North Hampton, New Hampshire



Steven James'
chocolate raspberry cups



decorating options. We can also do tiers of cupcakes so you have the visual effect of a multilayer cake — it makes for a very nice presentation.”

For the holidays, Gardner whips up cupcakes in seasonal flavors such as gingerbread, eggnog with rum, Irish coffee, peppermint, and others. She adorns them with decorations ranging from simple candied disks molded into holiday messages to elaborate creations of miniature gingerbread houses, detailed Christmas ornaments and trees, angels, dreidels, snowmen, and more. One way to create a nice table display is to order a small cake, with a side order of cupcakes to match. “Having a small themed cake surrounded by cupcakes in coordinating colors and designs looks really nice and gives guests options,” she says.

At BiNa alimentari, a gourmet food shop in Boston, owner Babak Bina recommends a platter of European-style cupcakes, which are filled with Italian liqueurs. “These are cupcakes for grown-ups!” he says. “The liqueurs give the cupcakes a wonderful flavor and a bit of a kick!” BiNa alimentari (“alimentari” is Italian for “corner grocery shop”), also offers French macarons, currently very trendy, and perfect for the holidays. “These macarons are light, airy, not filling, and just the right size,” says Bina. “They come in flavors like cherry and pistachio, as well as vanilla, so you can have a festive plate of pink and green.”

Bina also offers ideas for a holiday party with an Italian flair. “Offer a scoop of either homemade or store-bought peppermint gelato served *affogato* style — doused with a shot of espresso — with cookies on the side,” he says. “Another fun idea is to buy a few different flavors of gelato and offer make-your-own sundaes with various holiday-themed toppings, such as peppermint candies, marzipan, fudge, toffees, and so on.”

Cheers!

For the perfect dessert party, our experts recommended the following beverages to accompany your sweet selections.

Stephen James: “I stick with the holiday classics — a really good homemade hot cocoa, eggnog (see page 20 for a lighter version of this classic), or hot mulled cider. The cider and the cocoa make the house smell so good.”

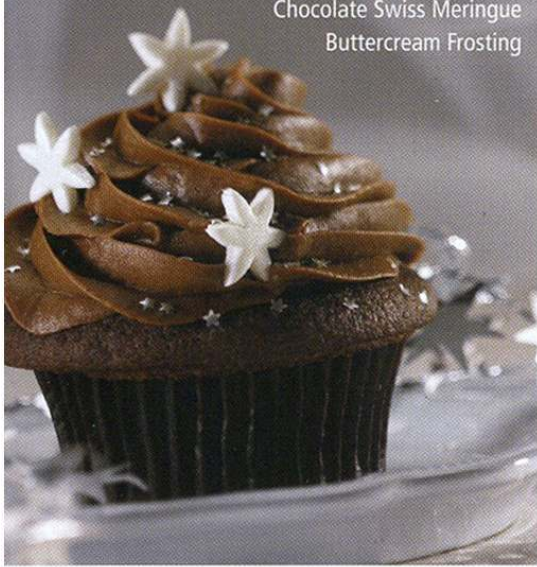
Sonja Swanberg: “I love Spanish cava, a sparkling wine — also known as the Spanish champagne — it’s inexpensive and goes with anything.”

Erin Gardner: “A nice dessert wine, maybe a sweet ice wine, and a nice dry reisling. Another idea is a holiday cocktail, such as one that plays off a dessert by using a flavored liqueur like chocolate or pomegranate.”

Babak Bina: “I never turn down a glass of champagne! I love something bubbly for a celebration — like Moscato di Asti, a dessert wine that is not overly sweet. A sparkling rosé will also work beautifully. They have a lovely holiday color, and there are a number of inexpensive varieties available with a wonderful taste.”



Chocolate Cupcake with a
Chocolate Swiss Meringue
Buttercream Frosting



Of course, not to be omitted is the much maligned fruit cake. While stories abound about Grandma's rock hard creation that was used as a door stop, a well-done fruit cake is actually a tempting concoction of candied fruit and fruit rinds, nuts, spices, and cake well-soaked in liquor. In the south, the alcohol of choice is brandy or whiskey, but in New England, it's rum, a nod to our seafaring heritage. According to James, Popovers sells a fair number of fruitcakes for holiday parties. "Its unique blend of flavors, not to mention tradition, still make it the essence of holiday celebrations," he says.

Easy Home Creations

If you can't imagine the holidays without baking, then try these easy party options.

"I always love brownies," says James. "They were invented in Boston, so that makes them a nice New England tradition, and they are easy to dress up. Top them with caramel, peanut butter icing, coffee icing, creme de menthe icing, or even holiday candies—the kids love to help decorate them, and aren't the holidays about getting families involved? Brownies are simple to make, but taste incredible, and can look very nice on a plate."

For a family-oriented party, James suggests making gingerbread men, and letting guests decorate their own. "They can nibble on treats while they are decorating, then enjoy the finished cookies, or take some home."

Swanberg suggests doing a couple different variations on the ever-popular

chocolate cupcake. "It's pretty easy. Just put different jams inside, such as strawberry, raspberry, cherry, orange marmalade, and maybe to be different, an unexpected flavor like fig. You can also add pizzazz to ordinary cupcakes by glazing them with a simple icing infused with other flavors, liqueurs or flavored coffees."

Gardner suggests mixing and matching storebought cupcakes with treats made at home, and also encourages the home baker to unleash their creativity on cupcakes of their own design. "The decorating options today are endless," she explains. "You can get sprinkles that look like real sparkles—very prismatic; they make the cupcakes look incredible. There are also metallic sprinkles in different shapes and colors that transform a plain cupcake into something special. You can find some incredible, inexpensive decorations at stores like Michael's and A.C. Moore."

Chocolate Cupcakes

From Tracey Noonan, *Wicked Good Cupcakes*

- 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ cups all purpose flour
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups high quality unsweetened cocoa powder
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoons baking soda
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup sour cream
- 2 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons pure Madagascar bourbon vanilla extract
- 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter
- 2 cups granulated sugar
- 2 eggs (room temperature)
- 1 cup coffee

1. Preheat oven to 350°F
2. Line standard size muffin tins with cupcake wrappers.
3. In a large bowl, sift together the dry ingredients and set aside.
4. In another bowl combine vanilla, mayonnaise and sour cream.
5. In the bowl of a free standing mixer combine the butter and sugar. Beat on medium speed until smooth.
6. Add eggs one at a time scraping the sides thoroughly.
7. Alternately add the flour and sour cream mixture again being certain to scrape down the sides and bottom of bowl.

8. Slowly add the coffee. Again scrape down sides of bowl.

9. Using an ice cream scoop, fill each cupcake well $\frac{2}{3}$ full.

10. Bake for 20–24 minutes or until toothpick that has been inserted comes out clean.

11. Let cool in cupcake pan for 10 minutes. Then cool on wire rack for one hour before frosting.

Makes approximately 24 cupcakes.

Notes:

- Cupcakes can be stored in an airtight container like this for 2–3 days.
- A simple syrup can be brushed on cooled cupcakes before frosting in order to lock in moisture.

For the Simple Syrup:

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup water

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup granulated sugar

1. Combine sugar and water in a saucepan over medium heat. Bring to an almost boil while stirring constantly. Remove from heat once all of the sugar has dissolved. Let cool.

2. Using a pastry brush apply to cooled cupcakes.

Chocolate Swiss Meringue

Buttercream Frosting

2 $\frac{3}{4}$ cups granulated sugar

1 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups egg whites

5 sticks unsalted butter,
room temperature and cut into pieces

1 $\frac{1}{3}$ cup Madagascar bourbon vanilla
extract

6 ounces of melted (use a double boiler)
semisweet chocolate. Set aside to cool.

1. Whisk together in bowl of standing mixer the sugar and egg whites.

2. Place bowl over pan of boiling water. Whisking constantly, heat the mixture until the sugar has completely dissolved and the mixture is hot. Do not let eggs cook.

3. Place bowl back on mixer stand and whip on high speed until the meringue forms stiff peaks.

4. Allow the bowl to come back to room temperature. Approximately 12 minutes.

5. Add the butter, a few pieces at a time on low speed. Once the butter is sufficiently combined, turn the mixer up to medium speed and beat until fluffy.

6. Bring the mixer back to low. Add the vanilla. Combine thoroughly. Add in the cooled chocolate making certain to mix well.

7. Frost cupcakes and decorate with a fondant star, nonpareils or sanding sugar.

The All-American Brownies

From Stephen James

- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1 cup unsalted butter (melted) (2 sticks)
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- 1 cup whole eggs (4 to 5 depending on egg size)
- ½ cup natural Hershey's cocoa
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 cup walnut pieces
- 1 cup chocolate chips (optional)

1. Heat oven to 350°F. Grease a 13x9x2-inch baking pan.
2. Melt the butter over a low heat.
3. When butter is melted, using a whisk, mix in the two sugars and the vanilla.
4. Add the eggs one at a time to the butter/sugar mixture. After all the eggs are added, scrape the bowl well.
5. Add the cocoa and mix until well blended.
6. Sift the flour, baking powder and salt together, add and mix till smooth.

7. Add the walnuts and chocolate chips until well combined.
8. Pour batter into prepared pan.
9. Bake at 350°F for approximately 40 minutes, depending on your oven.
Makes 24 brownies, depending on how you cut them.

Tips:

- Don't open oven door before 35 minutes.
- Bake until brownies start to pull away from the sides of the pan
- For adults, the brownies are great served as they are — but for kids, you've got to frost the top, either with a fudge icing or a classic ganache. Then cut into 2 by 2 inch squares.

Ganache

- 6 ounces best-quality semisweet chocolate, finely chopped
- ½ cup heavy cream

1. Place the chocolate in a large mixing bowl and set aside.
2. Bring the cream to just below boiling point in a small saucepan over medium heat.
3. Pour the hot cream over the chocolate and let stand for 30 seconds.
4. Stir the mixture until smooth.
5. This ganache is best if allowed to set in the refrigerator while the brownies bake and then cool. When brownies are cool, apply the ganache using an off-set spatula.

Now, try not to eat 'em all before your guests arrive!

