

EATING & DRINKING

I Made This for You (and It's Good)

Defiantly noncommercial, homespun holiday presents are great—in theory. Here's how chefs do food gifts better

I GLORY IN the Christmas season's wanton excesses: standing rib roasts the size of Volkswagens, maudlin displays of nog-induced affection, lawn decoration schemes that defy logic. There's too much of everything, and that's the whole point. But when it comes to edible gifting, I have to admit that for a week or two at the end of December, the pace gets out of control. On more than one occasion I have conceded defeat, abandoning entire tins of gingerbread people to the office kitchenette. Come spring, a packet of lovingly wrapped sugar cookies always seems to turn up under a pile of forgotten mail, hard as roofing tiles.

Don't get me wrong: I'm a big fan of homemade food presents, both as a giver and as a recipient. They are inexpensive yet indulgent, at once highly personal and universal in their pleasure-giving. But this year, rather than add to the glut of perishable sweets, I went in search of gifts that would outlast the holiday.

How about a bottle of spiced whiskey punch, ready to pour and share—whatever the time of year? Or a briny feta, marinated in good olive oil perfumed with lemon, pepper and rosemary? Stirred into coffee, a spoonful of "winter sugar," a syrupy concoction of amber sugar infused with rum and cinnamon and loaded with dried fruit, will induce more good cheer than caffeine alone. And cruets of thyme-scented oil and blood-orange vinegar will elevate salads during those long winter months when the produce selection is less than inspiring.

Here, three chefs and a bartender offer recipes for simple, elegant homemade food gifts your loved ones will enjoy into January and beyond. —Elizabeth Gunnison Dunn

House-Jarred Marinated Feta

Stacey Daley of *Central Bottle Wine + Provisions* in Cambridge, Mass., took inspiration for this jarred feta from her Greek grandmother. It can be spread on bread, sprinkled on salads or eaten on its own as an antipasto. Makes: one 9-ounce jar

Cut **6 ounces feta** into ¼-inch cubes. Pick the leaves from a **6-inch sprig each of thyme and rosemary**. Use a vegetable peeler to remove **four 2-inch-long strips of lemon peel** from 1 lemon. // In a clean 9-ounce jar, lay down ½ of feta cubes, followed by ½ of thyme and rosemary. Sprinkle **5 pink peppercorns** and a pinch of

Aleppo pepper on top, followed by 2 lemon strips. Repeat process once more with the same amounts of feta, pink peppercorns and Aleppo pepper, then top with remaining feta cubes, leaving a ½-inch gap at top of jar. // Pour in olive oil to cover feta completely. Seal and let sit in refrigerator at least 7 days before using. // To serve, remove from refrigerator about 20 minutes in

advance to let oil come to room temperature. Store, refrigerated, up to two months.

Winter Sugar

Heiko Riebandt is the chef at the *Lodge at Doonbeg* in County Clare, Ireland, where Christmas is celebrated in grand style. This recipe was inspired by a specialty of Mr. Riebandt's native Germany: rudesheimer kaffe, a holiday tippel made from hot coffee, brandy and sugar cubes. This mix of rum-soaked amber sugar, honey, spices and dried fruit can be used to sweeten coffee, tea or mulled wine, or to drizzle over everything from ice cream to pie. Makes: one 16-ounce jar

In a 16-ounce terrine jar, sprinkle ¼ cup amber sugar crystals, followed by ¼ cup dried fruit. Repeat three more times with the same amounts of sugar and fruit, placing 1 cinnamon stick in after the second layer, leaving a ½-inch gap at top of jar. // Pour in 1 cup dark rum (at least 50% ABV), until top layer is just covered. Bring ¼ cup honey to a boil and pour it over top. Seal immediately. // Once opened, store in refrigerator up to six months.

Bottled Usqueabach Punch

At the *Dead Rabbit Grocery & Grog* in Manhattan, bartender-owner Jack McGarry plumbs the depths of pre-Prohibition cocktail culture. Punch was wildly popular as a celebratory beverage as early as the 18th century; this whisky-and-tea-based, lemon-and-nutmeg-laced recipe, which takes its name from the Gaelic word for whiskey, comes from an English text published in 1869. Mr. McGarry keeps several types of bottled punch on the premises at all times. You can purchase the *Dead Rabbit Orinoco Bitters* at deadrabbitnyc.com, and the *Pimento Dram* at drinkupny.com. Makes: one 750-ml bottle

In a large mixing bowl, combine **5 of 4 lemons** and ½ cup sugar. Muddle until all oil from zest has been extracted and has colored sugar, then add ½ cup freshly squeezed lemon juice and 1½ cups boiling English breakfast tea. Stir until sugar has dissolved. Add 1 tablespoon Pimento Dram or Angostura bitters, 1½ cups Jameson Irish Whiskey and 6 dashes Dead Rabbit Orinoco

Bitters or Angostura bitters. Grate in ½ a nutmeg. // Strain through a fine-mesh sieve into a 750-ml bottle and seal immediately. Store in refrigerator up to three weeks.

Thyme Oil and Blood Orange Vinegar

This pretty infused olive oil and vinegar set, from chef Robert McCormick of *Element 47* at the *Little Nell* in Aspen, Colo., will keep your giftees in well-dressed salads all the way through January. The dressings can be stored simply in sealed bottles or canning jars. Or up the ante by packaging them in beautiful oil and vinegar cruets. Makes: one 12-ounce jar of oil and one 12-ounce jar of vinegar

Make blood orange vinegar: Peel 4 small or 2 large blood oranges, reserving a 2-inch strip of peel, free of pith. Use a paring knife to remove orange flesh in sections from membrane. Pour 8 ounces red wine vinegar into a blender and squeeze in any remaining juice from orange membrane. Add orange flesh and purée until smooth. Store in a sealed container in refrigerator for 24 hours, then

strain through a fine-mesh sieve and transfer to a 12-ounce bottle. Close tightly. Vinegar will keep up to four weeks. // Make thyme oil: Preheat oven to 250 degrees. Wash ¼ bunch fresh thyme under running water and dry with paper towels. Arrange sprigs on a baking sheet in a single layer and bake just until brittle, 5-10 minutes. In a medium pot over low heat, combine 12 ounces olive oil and dried thyme. Cook just below a simmer 4-5 minutes. Transfer thyme to a paper towel and let oil cool to room temperature. Once oil has cooled, pour into a sterile 12-ounce bottle. Add reserved thyme. Close tightly. Oil will keep, refrigerated, up to four weeks. Bring to room temperature before using.



BOTTLED CHEER From left: "winter sugar," house-jarred marinated feta, bottled usqueabach punch, thyme oil and blood orange vinegar.

