

Florida Food Fare

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Gifts From the Kitchen

Even though we've barely unpacked from our summer vacation and the kids have just started back to school, it isn't too early to start thinking about holiday gifts. Though most of us have little time to spare, there seems to be a trend toward homemade gifts reminiscent of our ancestors who didn't have the luxury of going to the local mall. For some reason the smallest homemade gift brings so much more joy than the slippers, sweaters or tools purchased from the store.

There are many gifts you can make right in your own kitchen. Making flavored vinegar has become popular for gift giving. It can be used in salad dressings or marinades to add variety and zest to your recipes. Flavored vinegar can be substituted in any recipe calling for plain vinegar. Just use your creativity. Flavored coffee and tea are also popular, along with spiced nuts, caramel corn, homemade fudge, and jams and jellies. Choose decorative containers or decorate your own with bright fabric, dried flowers or herbs and ribbon. Homemade mini-loaves of various nut breads or fruit breads wrapped creatively are always a welcome gift. Mix some dried herbs and flowers for a fragrant potpourri or an herbal sachet.

Another favorite gift idea is a "mix in a jar". Layer the dry ingredients for brownies, cakes or cookies in a clean wide-mouth jar. Seal, decorate and attach baking instructions. You don't have to confine these great mixes to a glass jar. You can fill a heavy plastic bag and put it in a decorative tin or cookie jar. Fill a cloth lined basket or mixing bowl with a bag of cookie or brownie mix and cooking supplies, such as a wooden spoon, measuring cups and a timer.

Nothing says, "I love you," like a gift of food or a gift you have made with your own hands. They make great gifts anytime, not just for holidays. Try one of the following ideas or come up with your own. For more flavored vinegar recipes check www.fatfree.com or <http://recipessource.com>. For other great gifts ideas from the kitchen try www.kitchenlink.com and www.allrecipes.com.

Recipes:

Raspberry Vinegar

1 pound fresh raspberries

5 cups white wine vinegar

1 tablespoon sugar

Combine raspberries and vinegar in a sterilized glass jar with an airtight seal. Leave in a warm place to steep, shaking jar occasionally. After 2 weeks, strain vinegar from raspberries using a fine strainer. Press raspberries gently to extract flavor. Add vinegar and sugar to a saucepan. Over low heat, simmer 10 minutes. Transfer to sterilized jars or bottles. Place a few ripe berries in the bottle.

Spiced Pecans

3 tablespoons unsalted butter	1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon salt	dash of tabasco sauce
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon	1 2/3 cups pecan halves

Preheat oven to 300 degrees F. Melt butter in heavy saucepan. Mix in salt, cinnamon, cayenne pepper and hot sauce. Place pecans in a medium bowl. Pour butter mixture over nuts and toss thoroughly. Spread out nuts on a large baking sheet. Bake until crisp, about 15 minutes. Cool completely. Store in decorative airtight container. Can be prepared 1 week ahead.

Flavored Coffees

Café Viennese

1/2 teaspoon cinnamon	1/3 cup sugar
1/4 cup powdered non-dairy instant creamer	1/4 cup instant coffee granules

Combine ingredients, mix well. Store in decorative airtight container. Use by tablespoonfuls according to taste. Spoon in cup and add boiling water.

Cappuccino Mix

1 cup powdered non-dairy instant creamer	1/3 cup sugar
1 cup instant chocolate milk mix	1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
2/3 cup instant coffee granules	1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg

Combine all ingredients; mix well. Store in decorative airtight container. To serve, place 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon of the mix in a cup. Add 1 cup boiling water and stir well. Garnish with whipped cream.

Herbal Sachet

2 ounces dried lavender flowers **OR** rose petals **OR** 1 ounce dried marjoram buds
1/2 ounce dried thyme
1/2 ounce dried sweet woodruff

1/2 ounce dried rosemary
1/2 ounce dried bergamot
1 ounce dried scented geranium leaves

Blend all ingredients in a large bowl. Put mixture into jars or tins and close tightly. Allow fragrances to mingle for 10 days to 2 weeks. Shake container every few days. Make sachet out of lace, linen, thin cotton or cheesecloth and tie with a ribbon.

Trail Mix Cookies in a Jar

1/2 cup packed brown sugar
1/2 cup white sugar
3/4 cup wheat germ
1/3 cup quick cooking oats

1 cup raisins
1/3 cup flaked coconut
1/2 cup all purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking powder

Layer ingredients in order given in wide mouth canning jar. Mix the flour with the baking powder. Press each layer firmly in place. Attach the following directions to the jar:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Empty jar of cookie mix into large mixing bowl. Use your hands to thoroughly blend mix. Add 1/2 cup butter softened at room temperature. Mix in 1 slightly beaten egg and 1 teaspoon vanilla extract. Mix well. Shape into walnut size balls and place 2 inches apart on sprayed cookie sheets. Bake for 12 to 14 minutes until edges are lightly browned. Cool 5 minutes on baking sheet before removing to racks to finish cooling.

Makes about 2 1/2 dozen cookies.