

# Holiday Flavors



# A Savory Breakfast Casserole

The countdown is almost over and Christmas morning is about to dawn. It's a time filled with traditions, wide-eyed children, stockings and presents.

With so much going on, it can be challenging to put a festive breakfast on the table as well.

One breakfast that can easily become a holiday tradition because it can be made in advance and heated up Christmas morning, is a Christmas breakfast casserole. It's tasty, filling and the red peppers and spinach give it a merry appearance.

## CHRISTMAS BREAKFAST CASSEROLE

### Ingredients

- 1 tube ground sausage (consider using maple or Italian)
- 8 eggs
- 1 30-ounce bag of frozen hash browns
- 2 red bell peppers, sliced thin
- 1 package (10 ounces) frozen chopped spinach, thawed
- 1 teaspoon basil
- 8 ounces shredded sharp cheddar cheese

### Directions

1. Sauté the sausage in a skillet until golden brown. Drain and let cool.
2. Break and scramble the eggs. Mix in the chopped spinach, sliced



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red peppers and ½ of the shredded cheese.

3. Spray a 9-by-12 glass dish with non-stick canola or olive oil. Spread the cooked sausage in the bottom of the pan.

4. Spread the hash browns on top of the sausage and then pour the egg mixture on top.

5. Sprinkle the remaining shredded

cheese on top.

6. Refrigerate overnight or bake immediately.

7. Bake at 350 degrees for 40 minutes or until eggs are firm.

There are plenty of ways to mix up the casserole to fit to your family's taste. Do you want something a little sweet-

er? Slice and add apples or pears to the mixture and replace the basil with cinnamon or nutmeg. Do you want more of a kick? Use spicy sausage and a bit of cayenne pepper. Perhaps you'd like a vegetarian option. Skip the sausage and instead add portobello mushrooms.

There are as many variations on this recipe as there are families who celebrate Christmas. Some recipes call for adding toast, croutons or bread cubes to the recipe. Feel free to experiment and find the casserole that your family will clamor for year after year.

# Festive Finger Foods

Holiday parties are a great time to spread out festive finger foods that will impress your guests as they mingle.

Appetizers are easy to adapt to any size party and allow you as the host to accommodate many different types of diets.

## VEGETARIAN APPETIZERS

Whether your guests are die-hard vegetarians or just wanting to limit the meat in their diet, there are plenty of festive vegetarian options for finger foods:

- **Cranberry brie tarts.** Use frozen pre-made mini pastry cups and add a small square of brie topped off with cranberry sauce. Heat and serve.
- **Parsnip pig-in-the-blankets.** A variation on the hot dog or sausage options, this uses a finger of parsnips wrapped up in crescent roll dough.
- **Gorgonzola polenta bites.** Cut a tube of polenta into slices and heat in a skillet. Then top it with gorgonzola cheese and your choice of marmalade or preserves and dried currants or dried cranberries.

## MEAT APPETIZERS

Gift the meat-lovers among your guests with any of these savory appetizers:

- **Sausage pinwheels.** This appetizer has been around for decades but never loses its popularity. Roll out some biscuit dough, spread the ground sausage, roll up and bake. For variety, you can sprinkle different kinds of shredded cheese on the sausage before rolling it up.
- **Ham and pickle roll-ups.** Another perennial favorite, perhaps because it is so easy to make and so very tasty, all you have to do is spread cream cheese (try a salmon or veggie flavored cream cheese for some extra flair) on a rect-

angle of thinly sliced ham and wrap it around a gherkins pickle and cut into bite-size pieces.

- **Bacon-date almond bites.** Buy pitted whole dates and stuff each one with an almond. Fry up your bacon and then wrap them around the date and secure with a toothpick.

## GLUTEN-FREE APPETIZERS

Whether any of your guests have an extreme gluten sensitivity or it just causes them discomfort, there are plenty of tasty options that will keep them feeling good and the rest of your guests will snap up as well:

- **Bacon-wrapped pineapple.** Drain some pineapple chunks and then sprinkle gluten-free soy sauce on them. Wrap them up in bacon and broil until the bacon is cooked.
- **Bacon-wrapped sweet potato bites.** Cut sweet potatoes into cubes and sprinkle them with ginger and caraway. Wrap the cubes in bacon and bake in the oven until the potato is tender and the bacon is crisp.
- **Goat-cheese dipped grapes.** Mix a soft goat cheese of your choice with heavy cream and honey. Heat and stir until smooth. Toast the finely chopped nuts of your choice (hazelnuts and pecans both work well). Put a toothpick in a grape, twirl half of it in the cheese mixture and then roll it in the nuts.

## KID-FRIENDLY APPETIZERS

Will there be kids at your party? Try such finger foods as mac and cheese donuts, ham and pineapple spears (with a maraschino cherry to add color), peanut butter and jelly roll-ups, cream cheese penguins or strawberry Santas.





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# Gingerbread Decorations

So beloved is the Christmas treat of gingerbread, that even Shakespeare penned a tribute to it in 1598, a character in “Love’s Labour’s Lost” saying, “And I had but one penny in the world, thou should’st have it to buy gingerbread.”

Gingerbread has had lots of uses and ingredients throughout the centuries and even today it can apply to any sweet treat that has ginger blended with honey, treacle or molasses.

## HISTORY

While it is now considered a Christmas tradition, Rhonda Massingham Hart in her book “Making Gingerbread Houses,” said the first-known recipe for gingerbread pre-dates Christianity and came from Greece in 2400 BC.

By the late Middle Ages, Europeans were making gingerbread cookies

shaped like animals or people and decorated with gold leaf. They were found in medieval fairs in England, France, Holland and Germany, according to PBS.org. Tradition has it that Shakespeare’s queen, Elizabeth I, came up with the idea of decorating cookies to look like important people who came to court.

It was in Germany, thanks to some other writers, that the cookie became a house. Bakers were inspired by the Brothers Grimm’s “Hansel and Gretel.”

German bakers formed a gingerbread guild, while in Sweden, nuns were baking it as a cure for indigestion.

Here in America, English colonists brought gingerbread with them as they settled the New World. Tradition has it that the cookies were used to bribe Virginia voters. George Washington’s mother, Mary Ball Washington, was said to have preferred a softer recipe for cookies than what was eaten in Europe. When Marquis de Lafayette visited her in Virginia, she served him this treat which became known as “Gingerbread Lafayette” and was passed down through the generations.

## BIGGER IS BATTER

While even the smallest of gingerbread cookies can make a great treat and families around the world enjoy the messy but creative undertaking of building a gingerbread house, some people get serious about setting records.

According to the Guinness Book of

World Records, the largest gingerbread house was built in 2013 at Traditions Golf Club in Bryan, Texas. They had to get a building permit for the house that used 1,800 pounds of butter, 7,200 eggs and 1,080 ounces of ground ginger. The house, which was almost 40,000 cubic feet, required 4,000 gingerbread bricks. If you’d tried to eat it? You’d consume 35.8 million calories.

Jon Lovitch, the creator of GingerBread Lane and the one-time sous-chef at the New York Marriott Marquis Hotel, has broken the record several times for the “largest gingerbread village.” According to his website, the entire village is entirely edible. He doesn’t use cardboard, stands or even fake snow. He spends an entire year making the parts of the village and then they are displayed in cities around the U.S. Each year, the village has at least 1,251 houses.

# Making Mincemeat Tarts

For some families, it wouldn't be Christmas without mincemeat pies and the recipe for making them is a closely guarded secret passed down to only one person per generation.

Today, though, the name comes across as somewhat deceptive. Why are they called mincemeat when there is no meat in them?

## WHAT IS IT?

Mincemeat pies today are a pastry made with a flaky crust and filled with mincemeat — chopped dried fruits, spices, sugar and nuts soaked in brandy and infused with citrus or mild spice. Today they are usually round, though the top crust is sometimes cut into decorative shapes.

Other names for mince pies over the centuries have been Christmas pyes, shred pies, crib cakes (referring to the Christ child in his crib) and wayfarer's pies.

## HISTORY

Mincemeat pies date back to the Middle Ages. Back then, mincemeat did contain meat, usually mutton, but sometimes beef, rabbit, pork or game. Mincemeat was a way to preserve meat. The meat was finely chopped, as was the fruit



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and it was mixed with a preserving liquid.

According to Walkers, who now sells packaged mincemeat pies, King Henry V served mincemeat pie at his coronation in 1413. It was his favorite Christmas dish, then served as the main course.

During the Tudor period (of which Henry the V was the first monarch), according to the website Historic UK, mincemeat pies were rectangular, purposely shaped like a manger and a pastry representation of Jesus was put on the

top. The pies were made with 13 ingredients, one ingredient to represent Jesus and each of his apostles. Different ingredients symbolized different parts of the Christmas story, such as lamb and mutton or the shepherds and spices for the Magi.

After the Reformation, mince pies started to be round.

The ingredients changed through the years. Originally made with lamb or veal, in the 18th century bakers started to use tongue or tripe. By the 19th century, minced beef was

popular. Again according to Historic UK, it was only in the late Victorian era and the early 20th century that meat was no longer used in mincemeat.

## FOLKLORE/TRADITIONS

The making of mincemeat pies carries with it many traditions. The most common one is that it should always be stirred in a clockwise direction. If you stir counterclockwise, you'll have bad luck all year. Stirring the mincemeat was often a family affair with each family member getting to

give the mincemeat a stir while making a wish.

It's also considered bad luck to cut it with a knife.

Mincemeat pies were often made on what is called "stir-up Sunday," the last Sunday before Advent begins. That is when British families would make the Christmas pudding and the mincemeat tarts.

If you wanted to have good health and happiness in the new year, then folklore has it you should eat one mincemeat pie on each of the 12 Days of Christmas.

# German Christmas Bread

While fruitcakes are the brunt of many a holiday joke, stollen tends to be loved by everyone who has tasted it.

## WHAT IS STOLLEN?

A German Christmas bread, it has almost as many names as it does fruit and nuts in its batter. It can be found under the names of Dresden stollen, strutzel, striezel, stutenbrot or Christstollen.

Cooking America describes the traditional bread as “a colorful collection of nuts, raisins, currants, candied orange, lemon peel, plus traditional spices of Christmas such as cinnamon, nutmeg, cardamom, mace or cloves, brandy or rum and lots of butter.”

It is usually covered with a layer of sugared icing or powdered sugar. Some of the legends say that the shape and the white icing was a symbol of the swaddled Christ child. According to one stollen bakery, Reimer's Stollen, the hump on the loaves represents the humps of the camels that the Magi rode to bring gifts to the Christ child. The candied fruits and raisins are symbolic of the precious jewels and gifts in the camel's packs.

## HISTORY

Stollen has been around for centuries. Culinary historians place its creation in 1329 when the Bishop of Nauruburg held a baking contest. Dresden bakers submitted a bread baked with the best butter, sugar, raisins, citron and other specialty ingredients. Not only did the Bishop award them top honors, but he ordered that each year a certain quantity of grain be set aside to be used only to bake stollen.

The website Kitchenproject reports



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that the first official mention of stollen in documents was in 1474. The Christian Hospital of St. Bartholomew in Dresden recorded it as a cake for fasting periods. That stollen was made with only flour, oats and water since sugar, butter and milk were forbidden in Lenten periods.

That rule sapped a lot of the flavor out of the bread, so in 1647, two brothers, Kurfürst and Albrecht Ernst petitioned the Pope, asking him to strike down the butter ban. They were eventually successful and the bread started tasting better.

Stollen continued to show up in German history. In 1560, giant

Christstollens that were 36 pounds and five feet long were presented to the King of Saxony for Christmas celebrations. In 1730, August the Strong held a festival to try to gain European allies. He ordered the Bakers Guild to make a huge stollen. It was 1.8 tons, 27 feet long, 18 feet high and a foot high. A special oven had to be built just to bake this one loaf of stollen.

## TRADITIONS

In the early days, loaves of stollen weighed 30 pounds. Residents of Dresden owned special utensils that were only used to cut and serve stollen.

Traditionally the first piece of the loaf was set aside as a charm to ensure the family could afford stollen the following year. The last piece was saved to ensure the family had enough food for the year.

In 1994, Dresden launched a stollen festival. Each year, they bake a huge stollen on the Saturday before the second Sunday of Advent. A horse-drawn wagon carries the bread and pastry chefs to the Striezelmarkt Square and, according to Kitchenproject.com, they ceremoniously slice it with a 1.2 meter long stollen knife. It is then sold to visitors and a portion of the sales go to charity.

# Sweet Hanukkah Treats

Every holiday has its traditional foods and a Hanukkah favorite are sufganiyots, jelly-filled doughnuts deep-fried in oil.

Hanukkah celebrates the miracle of the oil and the Maccabean rebellion which reclaimed and re-consecrated the Temple. When they took it back, there was only one jar of oil, enough to light the candles for a single night. However, the Maccabees lit the candles and they miraculously stayed lit for eight days.

Because of the miracle it celebrates, food fried in oil is traditionally consumed in the eight-day festival.

## WHAT DOES SUFGANIYOT MEAN?

According to Emelyn Rude, a food historian, in an article for Time Magazine, the word has North African roots. “Sufan” is a Greek word meaning “spongy” or “fried” and sfenj is an Arabic word for a smaller, deep-fried donut.

## JOURNEY TO JELLY

The donuts in Morocco and Algeria from which the word came, did not, though have jelly or chocolate fillings like today’s sufganiyot do. As migrants brought them to Central Europe, they had savory fillings such as mushrooms or meat.

The colonization of the Caribbean in the 16th century began to change that. Slave-



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produced sugar was suddenly cheap and plentiful and bakers in Europe began experimenting with sweet pastries and fruit preserves.

Historian Gil Marks says that the first-known recipe for a jelly donut is in a 1532 German cookbook. The cookbook, *Kuchenmeisterei*, was one of the first cookbooks run off of the Gutenberg printing press. This recipe called for spreading jam between two round slices of bread and deep frying it in lard.

The treat quickly spread

across the continent with different cultures giving it different names and different variations. Jewish peoples in Austria, Germany and Poland got rid of the lard, it not being kosher, and substituted goose fat and other oils. It soon became a Hanukkah favorite.

In the early 20th century, when anti-Semitism was on the rise in Europe, Jews who migrated to Israel brought their sufganiyot recipes with them.

## MAKING IT A TRADITION

While many people celebrat-

ing Hanukkah were fond of these jelly treats, sufganiyot still weren’t as widespread as they are today. That took the forming of a trade union to organize Jewish workers on Dec. 12, 1920.

The Israeli Histradut had the goals of full Jewish employment and integrating Jewish immigrants into what was then British-controlled Palestine.

Sufganiyot are difficult to make. Unlike latkes, another traditional Hanukkah food, they’re not quick or easy.

Most people would rather

have professionals make them instead. The Histradut realized that the making of these doughnuts could be assigned to people who had finished harvests and now needed employment.

Today, more than 18 million sufganiyot are eaten in Israel around Hanukkah. This works out to an average of three jelly donuts per citizen.

One major customer is the Israeli Defense Forces who buy more than 50,000 of the doughnuts on each day of Hanukkah and distribute it to the troops.

# Impress with a Swedish Tea Ring

While the Swedish tea ring is a delicious treat year-round, foodies suggest that it got its start as part of the grand Swedish Christmas feast.

To this day, many families serve up the holiday version of the Swedish tea ring on Christmas morning. Covered in snow-like icing and sprinkled with chopped green and red cherries, it makes a festive addition to the holiday table.

While the tea ring can (and should) be made in advance, it isn't for the faint of heart, nor should it be considered a fast food. Most recipes warn that it can take three hours or more, with most of it in the prep time. The reward comes from the appreciation of all who bite into this delicious Christmas treat.

In 1967, Betty Crocker provided this recipe for the cinnamon-swirled pastry:

## SWEDISH TEA RING

Prep time: 2 hours, 45 minutes

Cook time: 30 minutes

Serves 12-14

### Ingredients

#### For the dough:

- 2 packages active dry yeast
- 1/2 cup warm water (105 to 115 degrees Fahrenheit)
- 1/2 cup lukewarm milk (scalded then cooled)
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 eggs

- 1/2 cup unsalted butter, softened
- 4 1/2 to 5 cups all-purpose flour

#### For the filling:

- 5 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 4 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 1 cup raisins

#### For the glaze:

- 3 cups confectioners' sugar
- 3 tablespoons milk
- 1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla

#### For decor (optional):

- 1/2 to 1 cup candied cherries
- 1/2 to 1 cup whole pecans or sliced almonds

### Directions

1. Make the dough: Dissolve yeast in warm water. Stir in milk, sugar, salt, eggs, butter, and 2 1/2 cups of the flour. Beat until smooth. Mix in enough remaining flour to make dough easy to handle. Turn dough onto lightly floured board; knead until smooth and elastic, about 5 minutes. Place in greased bowl; turn greased side up. (At this point, dough can be refrigerated 3 to 4 days.)

Cover; let rise in warm place until doubled in size, about 1 1/2 hours. (Dough is ready if impression remains when touched.) Punch dough down. Roll the dough into rectangle, 15 x 9 inches, on lightly floured surface.

2. Add the cinnamon-raisin filling: Spread dough with the 5 tablespoons softened butter; sprinkle with sugar, cinnamon and raisins. Roll up tightly, beginning at 15-inch side. Pinch edge of dough into roll to seal well. Stretch roll to make even. With sealed edge down, shape into ring on lightly greased cookie sheet. Pinch ends together. With scissors, make cuts 2/3

of the way through ring at 1-inch intervals. Turn each section on its side. Cover; let rise until double, about 30-40 minutes. Heat oven to 375°F. Bake until golden brown, 25 to 30 minutes. (If tea ring browns too quickly, cover loosely with aluminum foil.)

3. While tea ring is baking, prepare the glaze: Mix together the powdered sugar, milk and vanilla until glaze is smooth and of desired consistency. When the tea ring is done, remove from oven. Spread with glaze and, if desired, decorate with nuts or candied cherries while still warm. Enjoy!



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