



December 2022

My dream was to bring excitement and a passion for learning to this two-room stone schoolhouse built in the mid-1800s. For the next three months, I'd be student-teaching here. This isolated school sat alone, over a mile from its nearest building in this rural Michigan community.

Snow frequently blanketed fields as far as the eye could see. Children arrived completely covered from head to toe with snow pants, snowshoes, snow jackets, hats and gloves. The classroom was always cold and damp, even with the heat turned up.

We were studying colonial America and examining the ways folks preserved food when there was no refrigeration. My lesson was on the ways that spices were used to preserve food, so I brought a couple dozen oranges, wooden toothpicks, and whole cloves into the fourth-grade classroom. I showed the children how you could draw a pattern on your orange, then use your toothpick to poke small holes along the design and insert whole cloves into those holes. The kids were enchanted. This was fun! The room and small hands smelled fabulous!

We left the orange-clove pomander balls on a newspaper-covered table at the back of the room before a three-day weekend. Upon our return, we found that the spices had not worked their expected magic. In fact, all of the oranges had turned a putrid green with mold that flourished in the damp cold over the long weekend, transforming my classroom into a massive petri dish. Several kids started to wheeze or sneeze. Two had to be sent home. I was told by the powers that be to avoid "projects" for my remaining time teaching.

Sometimes life just goes that way—the best of intentions turn moldy and plans must be adjusted. This holiday season, I've included some delightful gifts you (and youngsters in your life) can make and share. I hope your efforts mesh with the best of your intentions and something enchanting and festive results.

-Helen Huber

December Recipes

Orange Clove Pomanders



Ingredients:

- Firm oranges (not tangerines) -- 1 for every pomander you'll want
- Whole cloves -- You'll need about 2 tablespoons per orange
- A wooden toothpick, preferably with a pointy tip for poking holes. This will save your fingers and make the whole activity possible for soft-fingered children.
- (optional) Pencil, marker or pen (for drawing the design on the orange). Drawing a design leads to a recognizable pattern, if you want that sort of look.
- (optional) Ribbon, raffia, cord, etc. for hanging. When your pomander is complete, you can hang it by tying the ribbon around the orange.

Preparation:

1. If you want, draw a design on the orange. Swirls are easy to follow and draw, but drawing is optional, not required.
2. Using your toothpick, poke a small hole in the orange. The tip of the toothpick should not go in more than ¼". This hole will be where the clove gets inserted and pushed in.
3. Insert cloves until your design is complete.
4. Hang or place in a bowl. Take a whiff. Bask in your pomander glory.

Hot Cocoa Mix



Ingredients:

- 1 quart (32 oz.) Mason jar (or equivalent-wide mouth preferred)
- Optional: ribbon for tying around the lid and rim of the jar.
- Tag with directions for the recipient
- 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ c. sifted powdered sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup + level 2 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder, not cocoa mix (look in the baking aisle) *Note: A high-end cocoa will result in a superior final cocoa mix. Consider the recipient and choose accordingly.*
- 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup powdered milk, full fat, if possible, but nonfat will work as well
- Optional: mini marshmallows for topping off the mix in the jar. Leave room to screw down the cap without overly compressing the marshmallows.
- Optional: peppermint stick candy (Can be used for decorating the jar and for stirring into the hot cocoa for a chocolate mint drink.)

Preparation:

1. Whisk powdered sugar, unsweetened cocoa and milk powder in a bowl.
2. Put in jar. *(I like to make a funnel with parchment paper rolled into a cone and pour the mixture into the jar.)*
3. Top with marshmallows (optional).
4. Decorate with ribbon.
5. Add tag with directions: Whisk 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons cocoa mix with 1 cup hot water or milk. Stir gently until mixed. Top with 1 tablespoon of marshmallows, if desired.

Compound Butters



Compound butter is softened butter combined with one or more other flavoring ingredients. It can be sweet (honey, maple, molasses, cinnamon etc.) or savory (herbs, sun-dried tomato, roasted garlic, etc.) All are delicious, gift-worthy, and easy enough to make with children. Each stick of butter (8 tablespoons) yields one compound butter log.

Ingredients:

- 1 stick of softened room-temperature butter, salted or unsalted, per compound butter log. (Do not use a microwave to soften the butter. Either leave it on the counter for at least an hour or cut it into small pieces and those pieces will come to room temperature in about 15 minutes.)

Preparation:

- **Herb Butter Plus:** Cut one stick salted, softened butter into pieces and add to a food processor. Add any or all of the following before pulsing to combine well: 1 tablespoon freshly chopped thyme, rosemary, parsley, and/or chives, 1 teaspoon lemon juice (great on seafood), 1 minced garlic clove, ¼ teaspoon ground pepper, ¼ teaspoon fine sea salt. Scrape the herb butter onto a piece of plastic wrap and roll into a log. Chill at least 30 minutes until firm. Slice into pats. Excellent wherever savory butter is used.
- **Roasted Garlic Butter:** Cut one stick salted, softened butter into pieces and add to a food processor. Add 6 cloves (not heads!) of *roasted* garlic. Pulse until combined. Scrape the garlic butter onto a piece of plastic wrap and roll into a log. Chill at least 30 minutes until firm. Slice into pats. Excellent on potatoes, vegetables, bread, grilled meats or fish.
- **Sweet Cinnamon Butter:** Cut one stick unsalted, softened butter into pieces and add to a food processor. Add either ¼ cup brown sugar OR 1/4 cup honey OR ¼ cup maple syrup OR 3 tablespoons molasses (not blackstrap). Add ¼ to ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon. Pulse until combined. Scrape the sweet cinnamon butter onto a piece of plastic wrap and roll into a log. Chill at least 30 minutes until firm. Slice into pats. Excellent on oatmeal, waffles, pancakes, scones, muffins, or toast.