

Holiday Spirit

Second in a three-part holiday gift guide series

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'Taste'-ful gifts: The sweet, the spicy and the saucy

By **SALLY D. KETCHUM**
Special to the Record-Eagle

You need only to go a nearby market, specialty store or mall stocked with sweets, spicy treats, seasonings, sauces and salsas. In England, sugarplums were small pieces of fruit candied and surrounded by fondant, a cooked-down candy of sugar, water and cream of tartar. Now, sugarplums mean chocolate and cherries in confections, in many cases together since they complement each other so well. Can you taste dark or milk-covered chocolate dried cherries, cookies with dried cherries and chocolate chips, or cherries covered with chocolate with a creamy fondant layer between?

Quality is the pride of local candy makers — great taste, variety and customer care like offering gift baskets, packets and deli trays (including custom-made), mail orders, corporate orders, wedding items and treats for business meetings and holiday parties.

The Chocolate Den on Traverse City's Front Street (near the new parking deck) makes chocolates daily. Along with the classics, caramel, nuts and chocolate cookies, they offer various barks, creams, truffles and chocolates from various molds like fish, bears and sports items. Sugar-free candy is a healthy option, too.

Cherry Republic's Wendy DesAutels of Traverse City said that they have introduced "Rain Orchard Crunch," a gourmet caramel corn with dried cherries, roasted almonds and pecans. Traverse City's Kilwin's offers peanut butter-filled trees, chocolate crayons and white chocolate popcorn.

Molded chocolates, reminiscent of the old European holiday traditions, are popular since they appeal to the individual, his occupation, hobbies or even religion.

Kilwin's, having returned literally bigger than ever after last year's fire, offers solid milk chocolate Chanukah discs.

Alongside legends Paul Bunyan and Johnny Appleseed stands Benjamin Twiggs, the cherry man. Twiggs came to America with nothing but five crates of cherry pits. Over the years he worked his way to the Grand Traverse area, with excellent results. Likewise, Benjamin Twiggs Gourmet Cherry Foods was the first Gourmet Cherry store in the area, founded in 1966, and known for their gourmet gift

baskets. Christmas has its own aromas: spices, cloves, cinnamon, ginger and allspice. But when we think of spices, we also think of "heat." In modern cooking, the flavor and hotness appears in more and more salad dressings, in salsas and in sauces including marinades and glazes.

Heat is hotter than ever in sauces; Mexican cuisine and Buffalo Wings, now favorites, might have something to do with this. Tom's Markets carry sauces with such names as "Big Moe's Down Home Barbecue Sauce," "Now We're Talkin' Serious Bone Suckin' Sauce," hot sauces by folks like Jim Beam and Jack Daniels, and others famed for strong spirits and flavors.

Even quick window-shopping finds "saucy" gifts. Consider the array: cherry concoctions like mild or hot Cherry Barbeque Sauce at Cherry Republic; Twigg's Spiced Cherry Topping — super as a glaze for holiday ham, Cherry Honey Maple Syrup for pancakes, and Cherry Salsa, a middle of the road, not-too-spicy salsa is an a current example.

Sweet sauces are welcome gifts, too. Kilwin's uses their own recipe for Caramel and Hot Fudge Sauces. Leelanau Country Inn's many sauces, dressings and fruit and herb vinegars are widely available. Tom's Markets carry Cherry Piquant, Cherry Chutney and Leelanau Country's Inn's dressings like Cherry Raspberry, Basil Garlic, and Greek. Even Subway sandwich shops offer bottled sauces.

Early in culinary history spices were used mainly to preserve food and even mask the taste of rotten meat. Now prime and choice beef roasts take flavor in cherry marinades, hams shine — glazed in cherry toppings, pork tenderloin medallions are accompanied by cherry salsa.

Twigg's Cherryaki Marinade made NBC's Today show during the National Cherry Festival this year. "People call from far and wide for this one," said Weinbrecht.

Spices are often associated with Christmas in taste, scent and pleasure. It's ironic that historically the high value of spices in earlier times caused greed, plunder and wars. Now world trade makes most spices available and affordable to all.

Sally D. Ketchum is a local freelance writer.

Record-Eagle/Elizabeth Conley

From the top: American Spoon Foods holiday gift assortment can be 'taste'fully placed in a birch-bark basket; Candy from Kilwin's includes Oreo cookies dipped in caramel and then drizzled with peanut butter or milk chocolate and biscoff dipped in milk chocolate and almonds and drizzled with white chocolate. True Harry Potter fans may enjoy his magical Jelly Bellies with flavors such as vomit, booger, dirt and earwax.



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