

# DINING L.A. LIFE



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Photos by John McCoy Staff Photographer

Richard Ruskell, executive pastry chef at the Montage Beverly Hills hotel, shares his recipes and tips for creating holiday food gifts.

# Season's eatings

Home-baked gifts add personal touch

By Natalie Haughton Food Editor

Richard Ruskell is the quintessential executive pastry chef, turning out sweets 24/7 (with a staff of 12) that run the gamut from breakfast pastries and scones to handmade chocolates, cookies, cakes and all kinds of chic desserts at the Montage Beverly Hills hotel.

When we spotted him competing and packaging up a basket of goodies in the "Ultimate Cookie Clash" that aired on the Food Network Challenge earlier this year — and winning the \$10,000 top prize — we asked him to share some of his vast array of goodies for

holiday gifting.

This was his fifth win (he's received \$10,000 each time). "I've competed more than a dozen times in five years and won more than anybody," says Ruskell. "It was all cakes except for the last show, which was cookies (six or seven). The competition itself is eight hours, but it takes four days to film a one-hour show."

Assembling the cookie basket, "was surprisingly easy. But making the cookies for it (he competed against three other bakers), which had to include all sorts of Asian ingredients,



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**FOOD GIFT RECIPES**

Recipes that follow are from **Richard Ruskell, executive pastry chef, Montage Beverly Hills hotel.**

**CHOCOLATE ORANGE BARK**

- 1 pound semisweet chocolate chips
- 1 teaspoon orange oil (NOT orange extract)
- 1/2 cup sliced almonds, toasted and roughly chopped
- 1/2 cup roughly chopped dried sour cherries

Place chocolate and orange oil in top of a double boiler. Heat over low heat, stirring often, just until melted. Do not let chocolate get too hot. Remove from heat. Can also be melted in microwave oven on high power in 30-second increments, stirring, just until melted.

If you have a silicone baking mat or parchment paper lay it on the countertop or place on a sheet pan. Pour chocolate out onto mat or paper and spread out but not too thin. Sprinkle with nuts and cherries. Press in lightly.

Place pan in refrigerator until bark firms up. Remove and break into pieces. Package for gifting or serve. Store bark in a cool place. Makes about 1 1/4 pounds.

**GINGERBREAD MEN**

- 3 cups bread flour
- 1 1/2 teaspoons baking soda
- 1/8 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 tablespoon ground cloves
- 1 tablespoon ground ginger
- 1/2 pound (2 sticks) butter, softened
- 1 cup sugar
- 3/4 cup plus 1 tablespoon corn syrup
- 1/3 cup milk

In a bowl combine bread flour, baking soda and spices. Set aside.

Cream butter and sugar using an electric mixer fitted with a paddle attachment. When lightened in color, scrape down sides of bowl and add corn syrup and milk. Beat to combine, scraping down sides of bowl.

Add dry ingredients and beat only to combine. Wrap dough in plastic wrap and refrigerate until very firm. Overnight is best.

When ready to roll out dough, remove only enough as needed at a time from refrigerator. On a lightly floured surface, roll dough about 1/8-inch thick. With cookie cutters, cut out desired shapes (gingerbread people, snowflakes, Christmas trees, etc.) and arrange about 1-inch apart on greased or parchment-paper lined baking sheet.

Bake in a preheated 350-degree oven about 10 to 12 minutes or longer (depending on size) until golden brown in color. Cool on pans about 5 minutes, transfer to cooling racks and cool completely before decorating.

Reuse dough scraps, refrigerating them as needed to firm dough. Repeat cutting out and baking cookies with remaining dough. Once completely cool, decorate cookies as desired with white royal icing (use meringue powder available at craft or cake decorating stores and make icing according to package directions). Store in an airtight container. Makes about 2 dozen large or more smaller gingerbread cookies.

**PUMPKIN BREAD**

- 2 cups sugar



Photos by John McCoy Staff Photographer

**GINGERBREAD COOKIES**

- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 4 eggs
- 1 1/2 cups canned pumpkin puree
- 1 cup canola oil

In a bowl, stir together dry ingredients, making sure there are no lumps. Set aside.

Place eggs in a large bowl and beat with a wire whisk. Add pumpkin puree and stir to combine. Add oil and stir to combine.

Again, stirring with a wire whisk, add flour mixture. Whisk batter until smooth. Turn into 2 (9x5-inch) greased and floured loaf pans. Bake in a preheated 350-degree oven about 25 minutes, until a skewer inserted in center comes out clean. Cool in pans. Makes 2 loaves.

**SUGAR COOKIES**

- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 3/4 cup (1 1/2 sticks) butter
- 1 1/2 cups sugar
- 2 eggs
- 2 teaspoons vanilla

In a bowl, stir together flour and baking powder.

In the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, beat butter with sugar until fluffy and light. Scrape bowl and beat in eggs and vanilla. Stir in flour mixture, to make a stiff dough.

Divide into 4 pieces. Refrigerate portions you are not using. Roll out one portion of cookie dough at a time to 1/4-inch thick. Cut out desired holiday shapes using cookie cutters. Place about 1-inch apart on lightly greased or parchment-paper lined cookie sheets. Bake in a preheated 350-degree oven about 10 minutes, until light golden. Cool completely on pans about 5 minutes, transfer to cooling racks and cool completely before decorating. Decorate as desired using colored icings. Reuse dough scraps, refrigerating as needed to firm the dough. Makes about 2 to 3 dozen cookies depending on size. Store in an airtight container.

**CASHEW NUT MIX**

- 1/4 cup simple syrup (1/4 cup water and 1/4 cup granulated sugar, mixed together and brought to a boil in a small saucepot)
- 3/4 cup turbinado sugar (sugar in the raw; available at Whole Foods and other stores)
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped rosemary
- 1 tablespoon maldon OR other sea salt
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 5 pounds raw whole cashews

Make the simple syrup first by heating 1/4 cup sugar and 1/4 cup water to boiling in a small saucepot. Pour it and other ingredients on top of cashews. Stir together until nuts are evenly coated.

Spread out on 2 to 3 greased cookie sheets. Bake in a preheated 350-degree oven about 12 to 15 minutes, stirring every 5 minutes, until nuts are golden brown. Cool and store in an airtight container. Makes 5 pounds.

NOTE: Recipe can be halved or doubled.

**MEXICAN WEDDING CAKES**

- 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, room temperature
- 1 1/4 cups powdered sugar

- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 2/3 cup toasted pecan pieces

Cream butter and 1/4 cup powdered sugar until very light and fluffy. Scrape bowl and add vanilla. Combine flour and salt and add to butter mixture, mix/beat just to combine. Scrape bowl and mix in pecans by hand.

Measure out 1 tablespoon dough at a time and roll to make a round cookie. Place 2 inches apart on ungreased cookie sheets. Bake in a preheated 350-degree oven about 10 to 12 minutes, just until cookies start to turn golden brown around the edges. Remove from oven and immediately roll in remaining 1 cup powdered sugar, sifted. Sugar will melt onto cookie and create its own icing. Cool. Store in airtight container. Makes about 3 dozen cookies.

**RICHARD RUSKELL'S TRAIL MIX COOKIES**

- 2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 3/4 teaspoons baking powder
- 2 1/2 teaspoons baking soda
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 3/4 cup cashew pieces, toasted
- 3/4 cup walnut pieces, toasted
- 2 1/2 cups raisins
- 1 1/3 cups pepitas
- 1 cup (2 sticks) butter, softened
- 1 cup plus 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup honey
- 3 eggs
- 1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla
- 1 cup uncooked old-fashioned oats

Stir flour, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon and salt together; set aside. Stir cashews, walnuts, raisins and pepitas together; set aside.

In bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the paddle attachment cream butter and both sugars together until light. Scrape bowl and add honey. Mix. Scrape, add eggs and vanilla. Mix. Scrape, add mixture and oats, scrape and mix to combine. Then add nut mixture. Mix to combine.

Drop 2 inches apart onto greased cookie sheets. Bake in a preheated 350-degree oven about 12 minutes, until golden brown. Remove from the oven and cool. Makes about 3 dozen cookies, depending on size.

**PEANUT BRITTLE**

- 2 cups sugar
- 1 cup light corn syrup
- 3/4 cup water
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 cups raw peanuts
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 teaspoons baking soda

In a heavy 3-quart saucepan, heat sugar, corn syrup and water, stirring, until sugar dissolves. Add salt. Cook over medium heat to 250 degrees F. on candy thermometer. Add peanuts. Cook to hard crack stage (290 degrees F), stirring often. Remove from heat.

Quickly stir in butter and baking soda. Using a wooden spoon, beat for a few seconds. It will get very foamy, which is what should happen. Pour at once onto a well-buttered 15 1/2x10 1/2x1-inch pan, spreading with buttered spatula. Cool completely, then break into pieces. Makes a little more than 1 pound.



**CHOCOLATE ORANGE BARK**



**PEANUT BRITTLE**



**RICHARD RUSKELL'S TRAIL MIX COOKIES**

- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 teaspoon ground cloves
- 1 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon baking soda

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