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HOLIDAY SWEETS,
GORGEOUS GIFTS,
GREEN ENTERTAINING,
FESTIVE FINDS,
AND MORE

Merry
& Bright

TOFFEE TALKS

This gift from the kitchen (yours or somebody else's) is an old-fashioned charmer.

EVEN THOUGH I HAVE LONG BELIEVED IN THE SPIRIT OF SANTA CLAUS,

I have also long realized that my more profound holiday wishes (more time, less stress, an easy way to travel with young children) aren't available from the fat guy—or anyone else. But there are still a few things I know of that are perfect for giving *and* receiving; among my favorites (an indulgent bottle of champagne, amaryllis bulbs paired with a gorgeous pot) are good old-fashioned gifts from the kitchen—especially toffee. Toffee is one of those treats that you probably wouldn't buy for yourself, but which would cheer up your winter considerably if somebody gave it to you. It's always in style, and it's useful to the receiver, who can choose to put it out when entertaining or sock it away for personal consumption.

In fact, toffee beats out plenty of other gifts from the kitchen in its universal appeal. Its crisp texture and deep, buttery caramel flavor—often topped off with a layer of chocolate and a sprinkling of toasted nuts—combine to make it addictively delicious to kids and grown-ups alike. It's more sophisticated than fudge; it stays fresh longer than cookies; and it has many more fans—young and old—than fruitcake. No wonder the chocolate-covered-toffee Heath bar is the *only* candy that has *two* Ben and Jerry's ice cream flavors devoted to it.

While making toffee isn't rocket science, it also isn't without its challenges. Anyone who has made a simple caramel sauce from scratch already knows that cooking with melted sugar can present a few common hiccups. If you don't cook it long enough, it lacks that deep caramel flavor; but cook it a minute too long and it can quickly take on a burned taste. Crystallization—when the mixture becomes grainy instead of smooth—threatens to ruin the texture. And while humidity won't mess up caramel sauce, it can wreak havoc on toffee: Candy-making of this sort just works better on a cool, dry day.

All that is to say that while I believe in the *spirit* of making homemade toffee and giving it freely for the holidays (see page 132 for some simple recipes to try in your own kitchen), I suspect that even Santa would approve of outsourcing this one if doing so grants you more time and less stress this holiday season. (Please note that while some toffee makers will tell you to refrigerate their products and others will say just the opposite, we found that chilling toffee helps restore its all-important crunch, which can soften in transit.)

The Chicago-based Vosges Haut-Chocolat is best known for its exotic truffles (such as the Naga, with sweet Indian curry, coconut, and milk chocolate), and the company now offers its take on toffee, too. Bapchi's Caramel Toffee (\$33 for a one-pound box) is named for owner/chocolatier Katrina Markoff's grandmother, who was one of Markoff's earliest culinary influences. The toffee itself is wafer-thin, covered



on both sides with milk chocolate and a combination of pecans and walnuts. While the chocolate threatens to overpower the toffee in this version, we can't say that we mind. For impressing someone with slightly offbeat, super-sophisticated tastes, consider the company's La Petite Gift Tower (\$55), with one-half pound of toffee, nine exotic truffles, and four exotic caramels. *Vosges is sold at some Neiman Marcus and Whole Foods stores, in many boutiques, and online; call 888-301-9866 or visit www.vosgeschocolate.com.*

Thousand Oaks friends Wendi Melideo and Limor Godwin, who met when their children were in preschool, began making toffee together in their home kitchens more than five years ago, using a recipe from Melideo's family. The duo has now graduated to a commercial kitchen, and their company, **Wendi's Fine English Toffee**, produces its toffee (\$26 for a one-pound box, wrapped for the holidays) in white chocolate, milk chocolate, and dark chocolate varieties. "My family was originally from Russia," says Melideo. "This was Great-Great-Aunt Paulina's recipe ... we have made numerous tiny changes to it in order to make it the great candy it is today." The women use sliced California almonds, European chocolate, and Wisconsin butter. "Each batch is made by hand," says Godwin. "And it's stirred with a lot of love." Theirs is a classic toffee that's roughly a half-inch thick. It's crunchy and crisp, with chocolate and toasted almonds on both sides. *Call 805-241-0034.*

Los Angeles is a tough town for aspiring actresses, so Amy Landers Eagles developed her own backup plan: **Lula Belle Toffee**. Named after the Southern actress's childhood nickname, her original toffee (\$30 for a one-pound tin) is covered with dark chocolate and finely chopped pecans, giving it a distinctly Southern accent. These days the pecan toffee also comes in milk chocolate and white chocolate versions; more recently she's begun offering peppermint and pistachio versions, too. Lula Belle is an elegant, thin toffee with a great caramel flavor. "We are known for our delicate crunch—not too brittle, not too overbearing," says Eagles. Customers also love that it doesn't stick to their teeth. Lula Belle has enjoyed some national press that has earned the toffee a coast-to-coast following, in addition to the customers it had already won here in Southern California. *Call 888-370-5775 or visit www.lulabelletoffee.com.*

Mrs. Weinstein's Toffee was begun in 1995 by Lotte Weinstein, a Santa Barbara resident who had immigrated to the United States from Copenhagen as a young woman. Although busy with family and work, Weinstein often made toffee for friends and family as



gifts, her recipe inspired by childhood memories of watching her mother make toffee back in Europe. Her devotees eventually convinced Weinstein to start her own toffee company in 1995. Then, in 2001, Sweet Shop USA bought Mrs. Weinstein's and began making the toffee—using Weinstein's recipe—at the company's headquarters in Fort Worth, Texas. Today, Sweet Shop USA produces Mrs. Weinstein's toffee in almond and pecan varieties (\$25 for a one-pound box; holiday packaging is offered seasonally); both are thick, nut-studded toffees topped with milk chocolate. *Call 800-222-2269 or visit www.sweetshopusa.com.*

Packed in whimsical boxes that come in holiday themes or crisp stripes or polka dots, the Chocolate Swirl Almond Toffee and Milk Chocolate Almond Toffee (\$20 for a one-pound box) from Massachusetts' **Harvard Sweet Boutique** are ready for giving. This thick toffee has lots of chopped almonds in it and is covered with a generous layer of swirled dark and white chocolate or milk chocolate. Boutique owner Sue George just opened her business earlier this year and is already gaining attention for her delicious line of toffees, brownies, shortbread, and cookies. In fact, toffee fans will want to take special note of her Chocolate Toffee Cookies (a chocoholic's dream) and Buttercrunch Cookies, both of which have big chunks of toffee baked into them, and both of which taste homemade. *Visit www.harvardsweetboutique.com.*

Opposite: Bapchi's Caramel Toffee from Vosges Haut-Chocolat is encrusted with chocolate and nuts on both sides. This page, top to bottom: Wendi's Fine English Toffee is locally made—and all wrapped up for the holidays; the sophisticated Lula Belle Toffee is shown here in its newer peppermint and pistachio versions; the recipe for Mrs. Weinstein's Toffee hails from Santa Barbara; Harvard Sweet Boutique offers its toffees in chic boxes.



SWIRLICIOUS CHOCOLATE-PEANUT TOFFEE

This recipe is made available as a courtesy by Nestlé USA and www.verybestbaking.com. Roasted peanuts and swirled milk chocolate and peanut butter morsels are a winning combination of rich flavors in this delicious toffee.

- 1 cup dry roasted peanuts, chopped, divided
- 1 cup (2 sticks) butter
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- ½ cup packed brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon light corn syrup
- 1⅔ cups (10-oz. bag) Nestlé Toll House Swirled Milk Chocolate & Peanut Butter Morsels

Line a 13x9-inch baking pan with foil. Butter foil. Sprinkle ¾ cup nuts over foil.

Melt butter in medium, heavy-duty saucepan over medium heat. Stir in granulated sugar, brown sugar, and corn syrup. Bring to a boil. Cook for 6 minutes (about 290°F on candy thermometer), stirring occasionally. Remove from heat. Working quickly, carefully pour hot mixture evenly over nuts in pan. Immediately sprinkle remaining nuts and morsels over toffee. Press down lightly before morsels begin to melt.

Refrigerate for about 1 hour or until set. Remove foil; break toffee into bite-size pieces. Store in airtight container at room temperature.

Makes about 40 pieces.

CHOCOLATE-TOPPED TOFFEE

Recipe courtesy of Land O'Lakes, Inc.

- 1 cup Land O'Lakes butter
- 1 cup sugar
- ¼ cup water
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 cup real semi-sweet chocolate chips

Butter a 15x10x1-inch jelly-roll pan. Set aside. Combine butter, sugar, water, and salt in a heavy 2-quart saucepan. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until mixture comes to full boil (7 to 9 minutes).

Continue cooking, stirring occasionally, until candy thermometer reaches 300°F or a small amount of mixture dropped into ice water forms a hard brittle strand (18 to 22 minutes). Remove from heat; stir in vanilla.

Pour mixture onto prepared pan; spread to desired thickness. Sprinkle chocolate chips over hot candy; let stand 5 minutes. Spread melted chocolate evenly over candy. Cool completely; break into pieces.

Makes 1¼ pounds (about 3 dozen pieces). ■

