

CHRISTMAS SWEETS



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FEW of the Christmas preparations do more toward creating the festive spirit than does the making of home-made sweets. The kitchen becomes the centre of activity as the news spreads and the family flocks in, ostensibly to help, but such is the popularity of the products that unless they are guarded carefully they are likely to disappear long before Christmas Day.

HOME-MADE sweets make a delightful and novel gift for a special friend and are more easily packed and carry better than many home-made preserves, cakes, or biscuits which otherwise are acceptable gifts. They also add that final decorative touch without which no child considers a Christmas party complete, and home-made sweets have the advantage of freshness of flavour and appearance which few can resist.

Many cooks, finding that toffees refuse to set, or that fudges become gluey or hard and crumbly, prefer to avoid this Christmas task rather than risk wasting the expensive ingredients often involved. These people may find that the use of a sugar thermometer, which enables them to be certain that their sweets are cooked to the correct stage, ensures success.

However, a knowledge of the intricacies of sugar cookery is not essential to the making of delicious and novel home-made sweets, and people who prefer not to experiment on cooked fondants and creams will find included in this article recipes for uncooked sweets which can be equally attractive. Marzipan sweets are in this category and present endless possibilities for the person who enjoys modelling. Even the less artistically inclined will find marzipan apples, carrots, or oranges easy to make, and they are always attractive additions to a box of sweets prepared as a Christmas gift.

To make the traditional home-made sweets successfully—chocolate fudges, toffee, or coconut ice for example—a person who has no experience in sweet making is well advised to use a sugar thermometer, if only the first time, to find out exactly what is meant by such terms as soft ball, hard ball, soft and hard crack, and caramel. The beginner, at least, is also recommended to avoid using recipes which give cooking times rather than cooking temperatures, for the quality of the confection depends primarily on the cooking temperature reached; that is, rapid boiling in a big saucepan may cause the sweets to be over-cooked, and cooking over a low heat may have the reverse effect, just as in the making of jams and jellies in which the same principle is involved. With variations of the type of sugar, amount of liquid, and time of boiling, a sugar mixture can be changed from an apparently simple syrup solution into creamy fondant, chewy caramels, hard, clear, or brown toffee, or intricate spun-sugar creations which delight the eye as well as the palate.

Sweets can be classified briefly into crystalline candies (fondants and fudges), non-crystalline ones (caramels and toffee), and modified candies (marshmallow and turkish delight), which depend on added ingredients such as egg white and gelatine for their special textures.

Making Cooked Sweets

Good equipment, dependable recipes, and accurate measurement are essential for success in making cooked sweets. A good-quality saucepan with clean, smooth sides and base, sufficiently large to allow the syrup to boil up slightly; a brush or fork wrapped in a damp cloth for washing down crystals from the sides of the saucepan; and a sugar thermometer or a bowl of cold water and a cup and spoon for the cold-water tests are necessary.

The method is in most cases basically the same, the main points being:—

Heat the mixture gently, stirring until it boils.

Boil it covered for 2 or 3 minutes to wash down crystals on the sides of the pan, then boil it uncovered, usually without stirring, to the desired stage of hardness. Take thermometer readings or make cold-water tests at frequent intervals.

When the syrup is cooked pour it from the saucepan and do not scrape the pan.