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MERRY MUNCHING Sugar-Free Treats Kids Love

by Judith Fertig

When sugar was a commodity only the wealthy could afford, “visions of sugar-plums” danced in the heads of children ensconced in Clement Moore’s *’Twas the Night Before Christmas*. Now, cheap candy is everywhere and not all that special. What is special is making memories aligned with contemporary traditions while enjoying naturally sweet, healthy treats that kids will remember helping to create.

“It’s important to limit sugary snacks, even during the holidays,” says Claire McCarthy, a Boston Children’s Hospital pediatrician, Harvard Medical School assistant professor of pediatrics and senior editor for Harvard Health Publications. She is also a mother of elementary school kids. “We need to use the opportunity—any opportunity these days—to teach children and families about eating healthy.”

Healthier Holiday Snacks

Mothers Amy Roskelley and Natalie Monson, of Provo, Utah, agree that raising healthy kids is a challenge. Dealing with picky eaters, getting family members to exercise and sourcing organic baby care products are all in a day’s work for them. It’s why they founded *SuperHealthyKids.com*. Subscribers have access to meal plans, recipes and healthy parenting tips. Recent advice includes ditching prepackaged popcorn (listing unpronounceable ingredients) and instead making the treat at home—popping kernels in coconut oil and topping the result with maple snicker-doodle flavorings.

Many moms turn to online boards for party ideas. Fun photos posted there guide kids in creating naturally sweet treats, such as fresh fruit skewers shaped like elves or magic wands

Natural Awakenings recommends using organic and non-GMO (genetically modified) ingredients whenever possible.

inspired by *The Nutcracker’s* Sugar Plum Fairy.

Gingerbread House Update

“Building a gingerbread house is a time-honored tradition for many families,” says Jacquie Fisher, a Kansas City, Missouri, mom who masterminds the educational blog and kid-friendly adventure postings at *KCEdventures.com*. Learning to construct the edible structure is intriguing fun.

“Testing out how to balance the walls, construct a roof and put together a fun little structure is the perfect intro to some basic physics principles,” she notes. Because she’s not a fan of sugar icing and candy add-ons, Fisher’s kids connect over how to make Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer’s stable with whole-wheat graham crackers “glued” together with a homemade maple caramel mixed with coconut milk. They decorate using dried fruit, nuts, dry cereal and flaked coconut.

Christmas Stocking Stuffer and Hanukkah Gelt

For healthy alternatives to sugary candy, savvy parents source sweet treats made with 100 percent fruit juice and fair trade chocolate available at health food stores and markets.

Registered Dietitian Abbie Gellman, in New York City, reinvents the Hanukkah gelt, or foil-wrapped chocolate coins, that Jewish children traditionally receive. She flattens dried apricots with a kitchen mallet, dips them in melted dark chocolate and then sprinkles the treats with sea salt.

We can always make wonderful memories true to the spirit of holiday traditions, and do it today in a healthier way.

Judith Fertig writes cookbooks and foodie fiction from Overland Park, KS (JudithFertig.com).



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Sugarplums Update

Healthy Sweets for Kids



Maple Snickerdoodle Popcorn

Yields: About 5 cups

Popcorn:

1 tsp coconut oil, melted
½ cup popcorn kernels

Maple Snickerdoodle Topping:

1 Tbsp coconut oil
2 Tbsp pure maple syrup
½ tsp cinnamon
Sea salt to taste

Heat the coconut oil in a medium saucepan, with a lid, over medium heat. Add 3 kernels of popcorn and wait for them to pop. Once the test kernels start to pop, add the rest, cover and allow to pop, shaking occasionally until popping slows to a near stop.

Pour the popcorn into a large bowl and set aside.

For the topping, whisk together the coconut oil, maple syrup and cinnamon, until well combined. Pour over the popcorn and mix well. Sprinkle the top with a few pinches of sea salt, mix again and taste.

Serve immediately making additional sea salt available.

Courtesy of Amy Roskelley and Natalie Monson, SuperHealthyKids.com/maple-snickerdoodle-popcorn.

Apricot Gelt

Yields: 12 servings (6 pieces per person)

1½ lb dried apricots
1 lb dark chocolate chips
1 Tbsp coarse sea salt

Using a heavy skillet or mallet, flatten apricots to ¼-inch thickness and set aside.

Place chocolate in the top of a double-boiler over simmering water and stir until the chocolate has melted.

Dip each apricot in chocolate, coating ½ to ¾ of the apricot. Place on wire racks set over parchment or wax paper and sprinkle with sea salt. Let stand until set.

Transfer apricots to baking sheets lined with parchment or wax paper and refrigerate until firm. The gelt may be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to three days.

Adapted from a recipe by Abbie Gellman, SPECertified.com/blog/view/apricot-gelt-recipe.



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photo by Stephen Blancett

Fruit Skewer Elves

Yields: 12 servings

- 12 cocktail sticks or short bamboo skewers*
- 12 seedless green grapes*
- 12 strawberries, hulled*
- 1 firm banana, peeled and cut into 12 thin rounds*
- 1 mozzarella stick, cut into 12 rounds*

For each skewer, thread a green grape to the bottom of the skewer to create the elf face. Top with a round banana slice to make the pale trim around the hat, then an upside-down hulled strawberry to form the pointy hat. Add a mozzarella round to make the pompom at the point of the hat. Serve right away.



photo by Stephen Blancett

Holiday Fairy Wands

Yields: 12 servings

- 12 long bamboo skewers*
- 24 seedless green grapes*
- 12 chunks of fresh pineapple*
- 12 strawberries, hulled*
- 2 starfruit (carambola), cut into 12 slices*

For each skewer, thread a green grape 3 inches from the bottom of the skewer, leaving room to hold the wand. Next, thread a chunk of pineapple, then another grape. Thread a strawberry, pointed end up. Add a slice of starfruit to make the star on the end of the wand. Serve immediately.



Rudolph the Reindeer's Stable

Yields: 1 stable

- Graham crackers*
- Small paintbrushes*
- Assorted fresh and dried fruits for decoration, such as blackberries, pomegranate arils and kiwi fruit*
- Dry cereal, such as Rice Chex, and flaked coconut for decoration*
- Pecan halves for roof shingles*

Vegan Maple Caramel "Glue":
1 cup canned coconut milk (shake the can well before opening and measuring)
3 Tbsp maple syrup
1 tsp vanilla extract
Pinch sea salt

For the vegan maple caramel, place all ingredients in a medium saucepan over medium-high heat. Stir until the mixture comes to a boil. Keep cooking until the caramel thickens and darkens to a caramel color, about 5 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Remove from the heat and let cool until just warm to the touch, then use for glue. If you like, make the caramel mixture ahead, store in the refrigerator and then microwave until just warm.

Dab the bottom of 1 double graham cracker with the maple caramel glue; then attach it to a dinner plate to make the stable floor. Glue on three walls, a fence and a roof. When the structure is solid, use more warm caramel mix to attach the desired decorations on the stable, fence and perhaps a courtyard out front. If necessary, reheat the edible glue in the microwave. Let dry for 1 hour.

Courtesy of Jacquie Fisher, KCEdventures.com/blog/healthy-gingerbread-house-ideas.