

SWEET LADIES

These top chefs share a few recipes to crush the dessert assignment at your next family gathering.

BY NINA HEMPHILL REEDER

THERE'S A GOOD REASON WHY DIETS START IN THE NEW YEAR. Frankly, it's pretty hard to pass on seasonal favorites like fresh-baked cookies, pecan pies and gingerbread-flavored anything, especially when they're tied to nostalgic memories of the holiday season and loving family moments.

"It's all about spending time with your family during the holidays, and that means sharing many meals together," says Chef Belinda Smith-Sullivan, who fondly recalls her own memories watching her mother prepare her famous coconut-pineapple cake for the Christmas season. "It is a time that you typically embrace [these] sweets treats and get to eat way too much without feeling any of the guilt."

Chef Rene Johnson echoes the sentiment.

"One of my favorite memories at holiday time was my grandmother Veltrue Johnson's pound cakes," adds Johnson, a California-based caterer. "I can remember the cake being on my grandmother's kitchen counter and us taking a sliver at a time until it was all gone. My grandmother Katherine Owens also made a to-die-for pound cake...Both of those holiday memories make me miss them and make me smile."

When it comes to family gatherings, there's nothing quite like a good dessert to put smiles on faces. So, if you've been asked to contribute a dish to your holiday meal, we've got the goods, thanks to the sweet acts of Johnson and Smith-Sullivan, who pass on a few winning recipes from their latest cookbooks. Put one of these show-stopping treats on the dessert table, and watch the mouths water.



Chef Rene Johnson's Never Fail Peach Cobbler

from her new cookbook *From My Heart to Your Table: Vegan and Traditional Soul Food*

Recipe lightly adapted for publication
Makes 8 to 12 servings

Chef Johnson, who has cooked for notable names like Vice President Kamala Harris and celebrity vegans like Danny Glover, says her famous peach cobbler is a great recipe that can easily become vegan with a butter substitute.

"Statistics show that more than nine million Americans identify as vegan, which means there is a good chance one of them is showing up at your holiday gathering, and you want the menu to be inclusive," she says. "Also, exposing your family and friends to some healthier desserts that taste great is truly a loving act for the holidays."



Filling

7 to 8 fresh peaches
2 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 3 cups of sugar
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of flour
1 tablespoon nutmeg
1 tablespoon vanilla

Crust

2 cups flour
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup Crisco or butter
7 tablespoons ice water
1 teaspoon salt

For Crust: Add 4 to 5 ice cubes to 1 cup of water; set aside. In a mixing bowl, add flour and salt, and mix well. Cut Crisco into 7 slices; mix Crisco slices into flour until you have pea-sized mixture. Make a well in the middle of the flour mixture, and add 7 tablespoons of ice water. Mix flour mixture together until it forms a ball. Once ball is formed, wrap it in plastic, and set aside.

For Filling: Slice peaches. In a medium-size mixing bowl, add sugar, flour and nutmeg; mix well until there are no lumps. Pour dry mixture over peaches, and set aside.

For Cobbler Assembly: Preheat oven to 375°F. Prepare a clean surface, and dust the surface with 1 to 2 tablespoons of flour. Remove flour from plastic wrap and place on floured surface. Cut pie crust in half, and set aside one half. Form the other half into a ball; lightly flour the top of the ball, then roll out to form pie crust. Roll out pie crust to the size of your baking dish. Next, roll your pie crust around your rolling pin. Lift it up and place it over your baking dish, pat your crust into your baking dish until it is nice and sealed. Stir your filling to make sure your juices are well blended before pouring filling into pie crust. Add vanilla and sliced butter. Roll out your second pie crust. Slice butter and lay cuts of butter over pie filling (add as much as desired). Slice your pie crust in 1-inch slices, and lay it over the top of filling. Bake for 35 to 40 minutes until golden brown and bubbly.

Chef Belinda Smith-Sullivan's Pecan Tassies

from her new cookbook *Southern Sugar*

Recipe lightly adapted for publication
Makes 24 servings

This Southern classic will be a guaranteed hit at your next family gathering. These fun, easy, single-serving pecan treats make a convenient addition to the dessert table. Plus, coming from the spice blend queen, chef Smith-Sullivan herself, these little bites are big on flavor.



Pastry

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup unsalted butter, room temperature
3 ounces cream cheese, softened
1 cup all-purpose flour

Filling

1 cup chopped pecans, divided
1 tablespoon unsalted butter, melted
1 large egg, room temperature
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon vanilla extract
Pinch of kosher salt
1 cup packed light brown sugar

Preheat oven to 350°F. Spray a 24-count mini-muffin pan with non-stick spray.

In a medium bowl, cream together the butter and cream cheese with a hand mixer. Add the flour and mix until well blended. Cover and refrigerate for 30 minutes.

Divide dough into 24 even pieces (using a scoop makes this easier). Using a small wooden tart tamper or your fingers, press dough into the bottoms and sides of prepared muffin pan. Dough should reach the top of the cups. Evenly divide half of the chopped pecans between the muffin cups and set aside.

In a large mixing bowl, whisk together the melted butter, egg, vanilla and salt. Add brown sugar and half of the remaining pecans and mix until blended and smooth. Using a small scoop, fill each cup to about $\frac{3}{4}$ full and sprinkle the last of the remaining chopped pecans evenly among the cups. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes or until centers are almost set. Remove from oven and cool completely in the pan on a wire rack.