



From Diwali  
through New Year's Day,  
15 recipes to sweeten  
your traditions



FESTIVE  
*bakes*  
FOR  
HOLIDAY TABLES



FIVE TO TRY: *Cozy up with these comfort-forward favorites*



Sweet Potato  
Swirl Brownies



Cinnamon Nut  
Pound Cake



Mexican Hot  
Chocolate Cookies



Ma'amoul  
Cookies



Chocolate  
Espresso Cocktail



# DIWALI

Mackensy Lunsford

Nashville Tennessean  
USA TODAY NETWORK –  
TENNESSEE

## Holiday reminds us what we share: Light, family and hope

As night pushes further into the day, Diwali, the ancient Indian festival of lights, offers a timely reminder: light has the power to push back the darkness.

For Chai Pani restaurateur Meherwan Irani, that message of resilience carries special meaning this year.

Raised in Ahmednagar, India, Irani now calls Asheville, North Carolina, home. Last year, Hurricane Helene’s floodwaters demolished businesses and carried away homes there.

Now, just over a year later, Diwali signifies a new beginning — not a dismissal of the storm, but a way forward.

“I’m ready to start talking about rebuilding, moving on, a new chapter,” Irani said. “Focusing on issues that still affect our communities — immigration, politics, culture, all of it.”

Irani’s daughter recently urged him to carry his passport everywhere just in case, something he never would have imagined needing to do only a few years ago.

“So, for me, Diwali is about pushing back against that fear,” Irani said. “It’s about bringing light into the national conversation again.”

With the opening of a new Washington, D.C., location of Chai Pani, named the James Beard Foundation’s Outstanding Restaurant in 2022, Irani is doing just that.

He’s teamed up with Vishwesh Bhatt, the James Beard Award-winning chef of Oxford, Mississippi’s Snackbar, to open the outpost in the nation’s capital. The timing feels particularly poignant given Chai Pani’s welcoming ethos and the approach of the Festival of Lights.

“For me, Diwali is about getting together with friends and family,” Bhatt said. “That’s been harder in the current political climate because opinions are so divided. But if we step back, we probably agree on 90% of things. We should focus on that and not let the 10% dominate everything.”



Meherwan Irani, Molly Irani and Chef “Vish” Bhatt

PHOTOS BY MOLLY MILROY/PROVIDED BY CHAI PANI; AND GETTY IMAGES

### Tradition

Diwali traditionally involves swapping sweets with neighbors. Chai Pani sells these spiced holiday cookies made by Molly Irani’s mom, Roz. They’re not too sweet, lightly spiced and perfect for any holiday cookie plate.

For Irani, opening a restaurant in Washington, D.C., right around Diwali feels serendipitous. The new space is colorful, vibrant and filled with energy, a pure celebration of Indian food, of community, of culture, he said.

“Chai Pani has always been about bringing people together at the table,” said Irani. “We don’t take political positions. People ask how we’ll handle being in a politicized environment in D.C. My answer is, ‘The same way we always have. We welcome everybody and look for what we share — kindness, empathy, compassion.’”

Bhatt echoed that spirit, noting that Diwali is about relationships as much as it is about ritual.

“The day after Diwali, on the Gujarati New Year, everyone visits their neighbors,” Bhatt said. “You bring sweets, say ‘Happy New Year,’ and spend the day connecting. That was always my favorite part, and it’s exactly what this business is about — sharing, welcoming, and connecting.”

To that end, Diwali’s message feels like part of a shared human story: finding common ground and, from there, carrying light into the darkest season of the year.

### Baking tip

Freezing cookie dough before baking helps cookies hold their shape.

Triumph of Goodness: Celebrate the Festival of Lights on Oct. 20

## Nani’s Chai Spice Sugar Cookies

- 2 cups butter
- 2 cups sugar
- 2 large eggs
- 1 teaspoon Sicilian sea salt (or other small-grain sea salt)
- 1 ½ tablespoons Spicewalla Chai Spice (or other chai spice)
- 1 tablespoon vanilla
- 5 ¾ cups all-purpose flour
- Optional: Royal icing for decorating

Yield: 4 to 5 dozen

With an electric mixer, cream butter and sugar for 7 minutes on medium speed with a paddle attachment. Beat in eggs just until combined. Add salt and vanilla on low speed until combined.

Mix chai spice into flour and add to batter, beating on medium until the dough pulls clean from the sides of the bowl.

Wrap dough in plastic wrap and refrigerate for 30 minutes.

Remove dough from the fridge and preheat oven to 325 degrees.

Roll out dough with a rolling pin and dust extra flour on the surface to prevent sticking.

Cut into desired shapes and be sure to brush off excess flour with a pastry brush before placing cookies on a parchment-lined baking sheet.

Freeze cookies on the baking sheet for at least 10 minutes to prevent the cookies from losing their shape.

Bake cookies for 10 to 15 minutes and then let cool thoroughly before decorating.

### Royal Icing

Yield: 2 cups

5 tablespoons meringue powder

¾ cup very warm water

1 teaspoon cream of tartar

2 ¼ pounds powdered sugar

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

Food coloring

In a stand mixer, using the whisk tool, blend meringue powder and water until foamy. Add cream of tartar and whisk again by hand.

Place bowl back on mixing stand and add powdered sugar one cup at a time. Once added, blend together for 9 minutes.

Scrape down the sides of the bowl and add vanilla extract. Continue to blend together for another minute.

The icing will be very thick. To use food coloring, remove part of the icing to another bowl so you can color only as much as you need.

Add any desired food coloring, and continue mixing until well-blended. Add a small amount of water (½ teaspoon at a time) until the desired consistency is reached. Repeat this process for the remainder of the frosting until all colors are completed.

Frost cookies using a piping bag and piping tips.





# HALLOWEEN

*No tricks, just treats: These cream cheese brownies will cast a cozy fall spell on you*

## Sweet Potato Swirl Brownies

### For the cream cheese mixture

8 ounces cream cheese, softened  
1 egg  
¼ cup sugar  
½ teaspoon vanilla extract  
1 cup mashed sweet potato  
1 tablespoon all-purpose flour

### For the brownie batter

1 cup unsalted butter, at room temperature  
2 ¼ cups granulated sugar  
4 large eggs  
1 tablespoon vanilla extract  
1 ¼ cups unsweetened dark cocoa powder  
½ teaspoon salt  
1 teaspoon baking powder  
1½ cups all-purpose flour

**Yield:** 24 to 32 brownies

To make the cream cheese mixture, combine the cream cheese, egg, sugar, vanilla, sweet potato and flour in a food processor. Blend until perfectly smooth and creamy. Set mixture aside while you prepare the brownies.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Spray a 9x13-inch baking pan with nonstick spray or lightly grease with oil.

For easier slicing later, line the pan with parchment paper, letting the edges overhang.

In a large mixing bowl, beat the butter, sugar, eggs and vanilla until glossy and smooth. In another bowl, whisk together the cocoa powder, salt, baking powder and flour. Gradually stir the dry ingredients into the wet mixture, stopping as soon as no streaks of flour remain.

Spoon roughly two-thirds of the brownie batter into the prepared pan, smoothing it to the edges.

Drop 8 to 12 spoonfuls of the cream cheese mixture over the surface, spacing them about 1 to 2 inches apart.

Add the remaining brownie batter in smaller dollops between and over the cream cheese.

To create the swirl effect, slide the tip of a sharp knife about ¼ to ½ inch into the batter. Draw gentle S-curves or figure-eight shapes from one corner to the opposite side, making lines about 1 inch apart. The key is a light hand — too much swirling will blur the contrast between the two batters.

Bake for 26 to 30 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out with a few moist crumbs.

Let the brownies cool completely in the pan before lifting them out and slicing into squares.

### *Sweet potato tip*

Roast or steam the sweet potato instead of boiling it. This keeps the flesh dry and sweet, avoiding excess moisture that can throw off the brownie texture.

**Spooky season awaits: Get into the spirit for All Hallows' Eve, Oct. 31**

**Nikki Miller-Ka**  
SPECIAL TO  
USA TODAY NETWORK

**i**n the South, fall is all about cozy kitchens, seasonal flavors and sweet treats that bring everyone together. Rich cocoa and sweet potato, a Southern pantry staple, come together in a brownie swirl that's more sweet than spooky.

Each bite offers the comforting warmth of autumn, perfect for sharing at gatherings or savoring by the fire. A wink to Halloween adds just the right touch of mischief without a scare in sight.

Equal parts rich chocolate indulgence and silky comfort, the cream cheese and sweet potato swirl bakes into ribbons of color and flavor, cutting through the dense cocoa base with tangy sweetness.

Use Dutch-process cocoa powder for a deeper color and richer chocolate flavor, or natural cocoa powder for a slightly tangier, more classic taste.

These brownies are perfect for sharing, snacking, or sneaking straight from the pan. They're an edible reminder of why Southern kitchens shine brightest in the fall.

### *Baking tip*

For the smoothest swirl, make sure your cream cheese is at room temperature before blending. Cold cream cheese can leave tiny lumps that disrupt the marbled look.



**Sweet potato swirl brownies bring tricks and treats to the table.**  
PHOTOS BY NIKKI MILLER-KA/FOR USA TODAY NETWORK; AND GETTY IMAGES



# THANKSGIVING

Elliott Harrell  
SPECIAL TO  
USA TODAY NETWORK

## Pound cake proves that the best moments are often the simplest

Vera Stewart, host of the VeryVera Show, knows a thing or two about pound cakes. The chef and caterer used to run a mail-order cake business and made more than 5,000 pound cakes each Thanksgiving season.

Stewart published all of her recipes from that business in her first cookbook, “The VeryVera Cookbook: Recipes From My Table,” including her cinnamon nut pound cake, a particular favorite for holiday tables with its spiced streusel layer in the middle.

“When you think about Thanksgiving, everybody’s got a pecan pie, so it’s nice to have a pound cake,” Stewart said. “It’s just a great dessert that has a lot of different uses.”

The simple secret to making a perfect pound cake is how long you cream the butter and sugar.

“Most recipes will say cream the ingredients until fluffy,” Stewart said. “But what does that mean?”

Having the patience to cream the butter and sugar for 20 minutes will give the batter a velvety texture, as it’s enough time for the sugar to emulsify in the butter. That yields a light, delicious cake.

Start the creaming process first and while you wait, go ahead and measure out all of the other ingredients you’ll need for the cake and make your streusel. By the time you’ve done this, Stewart said, your butter and sugar will be ready to go.

### Leftover ingredients

Use the remaining batter to make muffins. This should fill about 4 muffin cups. Any leftover icing can be refrigerated for up to 2 weeks.



**A day of gratitude:** *Gather with your loved ones and give thanks on Nov. 27*

## Cinnamon Nut Pound Cake

### For the cake

1 ½ cups unsalted butter, at room temperature

3 cups granulated sugar

3 cups cake flour

½ teaspoon salt

6 large eggs, at room temperature

1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

1 ½ cups sour cream

Floured baking spray

### For the streusel

1 cup chopped pecans

¼ cup dark brown sugar, packed

1 tablespoon ground cinnamon

½ cup cake flour

¼ teaspoon pure vanilla extract

### For the icing

¼ stick unsalted butter, at room temperature

4 ounces cream cheese, at room temperature

¾ teaspoon pure vanilla extract

½ pound confectioners’ sugar

**Yield:** About 16 servings

**For the cake:** Preheat the oven to 325 degrees. Cream the butter and sugar in a large bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment on medium speed for 20 minutes, until light and fluffy.

While the butter and sugar are creaming, measure out the remaining ingredients for the pound cake and streusel.

In a separate bowl, whisk together the cake flour and salt and set aside.

Mix the streusel ingredients in a separate bowl and set aside.

Once the butter and sugar have finished creaming, scrape the sides and bottom of the bowl.

With the mixer on low speed, add the eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition. Scrape the sides and bottom of the bowl again. Add the vanilla extract and let the mixture beat on low speed for 5 minutes.

With the mixer still on low speed, alternately add the flour mixture and sour cream, beginning with the flour and ending with the sour cream. Mix until well blended.

Add ⅔ cup of streusel to the batter and mix on low until well blended. Scrape the sides of the bowl and incorporate any unmixed batter if necessary. Fold in the remaining streusel by hand.

Prepare a large 12-cup Bundt pan with floured baking spray.

Pour the batter into the prepared Bundt pan until it is about 1 to 1 ½ inches from the top. Tap the pan on the counter to ensure there are no air bubbles.

Bake for 1 hour and 20 minutes. Insert a wooden skewer into the cake, and if there is no cake on the skewer, it is done.

Remove the cake from the oven. Allow the cake to cool in the pan, on a wire rack, for 15 minutes or until cool enough to handle with pot holders. Place the wire rack on top of the cake pan and flip the pan over. Gently lift the pan, being careful not to remove any of the outside crust.

Place the cake in the refrigerator to chill. While the cake is in the refrigerator, prepare the icing.

**For the icing:** Cream the butter and cream cheese in the bowl of a stand mixer for 3 minutes. At the end of the 3 minutes, scrape the bowl extremely well.

Add the vanilla extract and beat for 1 to 2 minutes.

Slowly add the confectioners’ sugar, about 1 cup at a time, beating on low to ensure the sugar does not fly out of the mixer.

After each addition of confectioners’ sugar, scrape the bottom of the bowl extremely well.

Once all the confectioners’ sugar is incorporated, beat on low speed for 3 minutes.

To ice the pound cake, heat the cream cheese icing in the microwave for about 45 seconds or until it is slightly warm.

Drizzle the warm icing over the top of the chilled cake. The cake should not be completely covered with icing. Once the cake is iced, place in the refrigerator until the icing is hardened.

### Baking tip

The secret to a velvety pound cake is creaming the butter and sugar for 20 minutes.

PHOTO BY PETER FRANK EDWARDS/PROVIDED BY VERA STEWART; AND GETTY IMAGES



Savoring Thanksgiving with golden harvest, warm spices

# Pear Butter Breakfast Bar

For the base

- 13.2 ounces almond paste, diced
- 1 ¾ cup plus 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 3 eggs
- 1 tablespoon vanilla
- ¼ cup gluten-free flour
- 1 ½ cups sliced almonds
- 2 ¾ cups rolled oats

For crumble topping

- 2 sticks unsalted butter, diced
- 1 cup plus 2 ½ tablespoons gluten-free flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 tablespoons molasses
- 1 ¾ cups rolled oats
- 1 ¼ cups sliced almonds
- 1 ½ teaspoons cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 4 cups prepared Pear Butter (recipe follows)

Yield: About 15 servings

**Make oat and almond base:** Place almond paste, sugar, salt, eggs, vanilla and flour in the bowl of a stand mixer and combine with a paddle attachment. Once thoroughly mixed, add the sliced almonds and rolled oats until just combined. Set aside.

**Make the crumble topping:** Combine butter, flour, sugar, molasses, rolled oats, almonds, cinnamon, ginger and salt in a food processor; pulse until the butter is the size of peas.

**Assemble the breakfast bars:** Preheat the oven to 275 degrees. Line a 9x13-inch pan with parchment paper and butter the bottom and sides of the pan.

Press the oat and almond base into the prepared pan, making sure it is evenly distributed. Use a spatula to spread the pear butter in an even layer over the base. Sprinkle with the crumble topping.

Put the pan in the oven and bake for 1 hour and 15 minutes, turning the pan halfway through. The breakfast bars are done when they are just set and no longer wobble.

Allow to cool to room temperature before cutting into squares. It can be helpful to run a thin spatula along the edges about 20 minutes after being removed from the oven.

Pear Butter

Yield: About 8 cups, more than you need for one batch of breakfast bars

- 12 large Bartlett pears
- 5 pounds sugar
- 3 cinnamon sticks
- ½ teaspoon ground ginger
- ¼ teaspoon ground cloves
- ¼ teaspoon ground allspice

Roughly chop the pears; don't peel or core.

Add the pears to a pot with about 1 inch of water and cover. Bring pears to a simmer and allow to cook until soft.

Once the pears are soft, pass the pears through a food mill or press through a sieve. This will remove the skin and seeds.

Combine the pear pulp, sugar, cinnamon sticks, ginger, cloves and allspice in a heavy bottomed pot and bring to a simmer. Cook on low, stirring every few minutes, until the mixture reaches 220 degrees.

Cool fully and enjoy.

Substitutions

Feel free to substitute homemade or store-bought apple butter for pear butter.

Any all-purpose gluten-free flour will work well. Using traditional (wheat-based) flour may slightly alter the texture.

Start with comfort: Thanksgiving breakfast is its own kind of tradition

Elliott Harrell  
SPECIAL TO  
USA TODAY NETWORK

growing up, Chris McLaurin remembers making granola bars alongside his parents and grandmothers and eating them after his family's annual Turkey Trot Thanksgiving morning. "Thanksgiving has always been one of my favorite holidays," he said, "because for me it was a time for everybody to get together and to bring the dish that they were known for and really loved."

McLaurin, who was the chef de cuisine at Ashley Christensen's Poole's side Pies in Raleigh, North Carolina, now runs Lutra, his own bakery, in Durham, North Carolina.

His menu includes morning buns that are a nod to his childhood and the Pillsbury buns topped with

homemade orange glaze that his mom would make, and the breakfast bars he learned to make as a kid.

The secret for a chewy breakfast bar, McLaurin said, is to pull the pan out before the middle is fully set. "If the crumble on the top is kind of moving around as you jiggle it, that's not quite baked enough," he said, "but you want it where the pan has just a little bit of a shake to it, and that'll be the perfect doneness."

For this version, McLaurin made a pear butter with warm spices that "feel like cooler fall weather and the holidays. But he said the recipe is very versatile.

"Whatever fruit is in season or jam that is your favorite from the store, you can use interchangeably," he said.

Storage tips

These breakfast bars from chef Chris McLaurin, owner of Lutra Cafe and Bakery in Durham, North Carolina, will last up to one week when kept in the fridge and can be enjoyed cold, at room temperature, or slightly warmed.



This breakfast bar comes with a pear butter with warm spices. PROVIDED BY STACEY SPRENZ PHOTOGRAPHY; AND GETTY IMAGES



# HANUKKAH

*Hand pies celebrate culture, honor family and sizzle with yummy fried goodness*

## Mule Ears

### For the filling

3 cups peaches, peeled and chopped

¾ cup sugar

½ teaspoon fine salt

2 tablespoons fresh lemon or lime juice

2 tablespoons cornstarch

2 tablespoons water

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

### For the dough

2 ½ cups all-purpose flour

1 teaspoon baking powder

¾ teaspoon fine salt

½ cup chilled vegetable shortening or cold unsalted butter, chopped into small chunks

⅔ cup buttermilk or whole milk

### For assembly

Vegetable oil, for frying

*Recipe and notes adapted from “Recipes from The American South,” by Michael W. Twitty (Phaidon, US \$54.95, 2025).*

**Yield:** 12 to 14 pies

**Make the filling:** In a large frying pan, combine the peaches, sugar and salt. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, then reduce the heat to low and simmer, stirring occasionally, until thickened, 3 to 4 minutes. Stir in the citrus juice.

In a small bowl, stir the cornstarch and 2 tablespoons water together to make a slurry. Add the slurry to the simmering peaches. Increase the heat to high, bring to a boil, stirring often, and cook for 1 minute. Remove from the heat, add the butter, and stir until melted. Set aside to cool.

**Make the dough:** In a large bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder and salt. Using a pastry blender or two table knives, cut the shortening into the flour to make pea-size crumbs. Add the buttermilk and stir with a large spoon or spatula until a dough begins to form.

Transfer the crumbly dough to a work surface dusted with flour. Gather and quickly press it together, kneading gently and quickly to create a ball of

dough. Flatten the ball into a disk, and cut the dough into 12 equal wedges, like a pie. Roll each piece into a ball, place on a baking sheet, and cover.

**Assemble the hand pies:** On a lightly floured surface, roll one ball into a 5-inch round, about the size of a teacup saucer.

Place 2 tablespoons of filling in the center of the round. Fold the dough over to make a half-moon. Wet the edges with water and press them together, then use the tines of a fork to seal them well. Continue rolling and filling pies. Cover them and refrigerate for 30 minutes.

Lay a wire rack on a baking sheet and set next to the stove. Pour 2 inches of oil into a large deep pot or Dutch oven and heat to 350 degrees or until a cube of bread browns in 30 seconds.

Working in batches of two, add the pies to the hot oil and fry until golden brown, turning once, about 2 minutes per side. Transfer to the wire rack.

Serve warm or at room temperature.



### Storage tip

Store in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 3 days or in the refrigerator for up to 5 days.

**Light the way:** *Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, begins at sunset Dec. 14*

### Mackensy Lunsford

Nashville Tennessean  
USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

These peach fried pies, also known as “mule ears,” come from “Recipes from The American South,” the latest cookbook by chef and author Michael Twitty, who has long explored the rich intersections of African-American, Southern and Jewish foodways. In more than 400 pages, Twitty traces the breadth of Southern cooking, including these crisp, fruit-filled hand pies. Fried in vegetable oil, they make a fitting Hanukkah treat — a sweet nod to the miracle of the oil that burned for eight days in Jerusalem.

Twitty said the dish embodies how Southerners name their food — and family — in ways that are lyrical, humorous and rooted in culture. “You could just say peach turnovers or peach fried pies, but no, it’s ‘mule ears,’” he said.

“You could just say black-eyed peas and rice, but no, that’s ‘Hoppin’ John.’ We love to name our food like no one else does.”

For him, naming is more than playful. It reflects history, identity and how cultures shape Southern cuisine.

“It’s so important that people understand that Southern is not bound by geography,” he said. “Southern is values, it’s culture, it’s history and an understanding of who you are. Our food is illustrative of our journeys.”

That journey, he added, is never one-dimensional.

“The South is not monolithic; it is not only about sweet tea and grits,” he said. “It’s a melting pot of so many cultures, coexisting and creating something bigger than the sum of its parts.”

### History

Mentioned by Martha McCulloch-Williams in her 1913 Tennessee cookbook, “Dishes and Beverages of the Old South,” this treat demonstrates the way deep-frying dovetails with desserts in Southern food, like fried apple or peach pies.





# CHRISTMAS

**Tiana Kennell**  
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USA TODAY NETWORK

## Spiced cookie brings bold flavor, heritage to holiday tables

The Mexican Hot Chocolate Cookie is a head-turning treat that will shine on any holiday spread. The rich, deeply cocoa-colored cookie is a stunner, set off by its toasted marshmallow topper, making it reminiscent of the traditional hot beverage it's inspired by.

Spicewalla Culinary Director Alyse Baca created and developed this recipe using

the Asheville, North Carolina-based spice company's Mexican Hot Chocolate blend, in honor of her Mexican heritage.

It's carefully balanced, with the flavor diversified by bittersweet chocolate chips, sweet brown sugar, and the kick of spice at the end of the bite, provided by the Mexican Hot Chocolate.

The chocolate's fat content mellows out the spiciness, allowing it to build a dynamic flavor without being overpowering.

However, for less spice, cut back on the amount added to the recipe.

The Mexican Hot Chocolate is a blend of premium Guittard cocoa powder (cane sugar, cocoa [Dutch processed with alkali]), cacao beans, cocoa butter, vanilla beans, natural flavor, cinnamon, cayenne, salt and nutmeg flavor.

The Spicewalla mix can be used for an assortment of dishes and drinks — including Mexican Hot Chocolate, truffles and as a substitute for any recipe calling for cocoa powder to take it to the next level.

The Mexican Hot Chocolate Cookie is a fun yet sophisticated treat recommended for adults and ambitious younger eaters with developed palates.

### Mixing tip

Spicewalla advises to cream the sugar and butter for about 5 minutes to get it light and fluffy, which will give the cookie a chewy texture. Avoid overmixing after adding the dry ingredients. Once blended, stir the chips in by hand.

### Spicewalla

A brand from the James Beard Award-winning restaurant Chai Pani, Spicewalla offers spices and blends at [spicewallabrand.com](https://spicewallabrand.com), where you can find other recipes.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY SPICEWALLA; AND GETTY IMAGES

**Celebrate the season of joy: Spread Christmas cheer on Dec. 25**

## Mexican Hot Chocolate Cookies

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- ½ cup cocoa powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 ½ tablespoon Spicewalla's Mexican Hot Chocolate
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1 ½ sticks of unsalted butter
- 1 large egg
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 cups bittersweet chocolate chips
- Marshmallows, for garnish

**Yield:** About 30 cookies

In a small mixing bowl, combine the flour, cocoa powder, baking soda, baking powder, salt and Spicewalla's Mexican Hot Chocolate.

Add the butter and brown sugar into the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with a paddle attachment; a hand mixer will also work.

Cream the butter and sugar until light and fluffy, about 5 minutes, scraping down the bowl as needed.

Add the egg and vanilla extract, mixing on low speed until fully incorporated.

Add the dry ingredients and mix on low speed until just combined — be careful not to overmix!

Add the chocolate chips and mix for just a few seconds, or stir by hand.

Scoop the cookies into 1-inch balls and place on prepared baking sheets. Chill for 20 minutes.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Bake for about 10 minutes, making sure the edges are baked but the center is still soft.

Cool for about 5 minutes, place a marshmallow on top of each cookie.

Use a kitchen torch to toast it. If you don't have a torch, broil in the oven for about 3 minutes or until marshmallows are golden brown.

Cool for another 10 minutes and enjoy.

### Time tip

This recipe may be prepared ahead and the batter stored in the refrigerator or freezer to keep it on hand through the holiday season.

**Mackensy Lunsford**  
Nashville Tennessean  
USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

## Panettone: A bread like no other

Panettone is persnickety. The European holiday bread is naturally leavened, and its pre-ferment requires two or three feeds a day for three to four weeks to ripen and develop the right acidity. But nail the long fermentation and the right method of post-baking hanging to keep it from collapsing, and you yield a gorgeous sweet loaf with a light crumb with bits of fruit studded throughout.

It's Raleigh baker Andrew Ullom's favorite thing to make for the holidays, in part because it's so difficult to

**Continued on next page**



**Panettone is an Italian sweet bread with roots in the Middle Ages.**  
JULI LEONARD/  
PROVIDED BY UNION SPECIAL







# KWANZAA

*A sweet celebration of Southern soul with Caribbean flair*



Upside-down cakes are a holiday staple in the South. Here, it's reimagined with ripe plantains.  
PHOTOS BY NIKKI MILLER-KA/FOR USA TODAY NETWORK

Nikki Miller-Ka  
SPECIAL TO  
USA TODAY NETWORK

**i**n the South, upside-down cakes are a holiday staple — sweet, sticky and celebratory. This plantain version blends Caribbean and Southern flavors, making it the perfect dessert for the karamu, the communal feast held on the sixth day of Kwanzaa (Dec. 31, also New Year's Eve) celebrating community, creativity and joy.

By reimagining a Southern classic with

plantains, this cake becomes more than dessert — it reflects heritage and the spirit of gathering loved ones around the table.

Some baking tips for success: Stir the batter just until combined to avoid a tough crumb.

Begin checking for doneness at 45 minutes since oven temperatures vary.

Rest the cake for 10 minutes before flipping to ensure the topping stays intact.

**Honor heritage, unity: Kwanzaa begins Dec. 26**

## Plantain Upside-down Cake

### For the topping

- 4 tablespoons butter
- ½ cup packed brown sugar
- 3 tablespoons dark rum (optional)
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 2 to 3 ripe plantains, sliced diagonally into ½-inch pieces

### For the cake

- 1 ½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup sugar
- ½ cup neutral oil, such as canola or vegetable
- 1 ½ teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¾ cup milk
- 2 large eggs
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 teaspoons dark rum (optional)

**Yield:** 8 servings

Heat the oven to 350 degrees. Place the butter in a 10-inch cast-iron skillet or a 9-inch round cake pan and melt it over low heat or in the oven. Stir in the brown sugar, rum if using, cinnamon and salt until smooth. Remove from the heat. Arrange the plantain slices in overlapping concentric circles, starting from the outside edge and moving inward.

In a large bowl, whisk together the flour, sugar, baking powder, salt and cinnamon. In a separate bowl, whisk

together the oil, milk, eggs, vanilla and rum if using. Add the wet mixture to the dry mixture, stirring until just combined. Pour the batter evenly over the plantains.

Bake for 50 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Let the cake rest in the pan for 10 minutes before inverting onto a serving platter. Carefully lift off the pan and serve warm or at room temperature. Chill any leftovers in the refrigerator.



### Plantain tips

For the best flavor, use plantains that are mostly yellow with black spots.

Greener plantains will be firmer and more starchy, while fully blackened ones will give a softer, almost pudding-like topping.

Ripe, but not fully black, plantains will caramelize beautifully.



# THE NEW YEAR

Nikki Miller-Ka  
SPECIAL TO  
USA TODAY NETWORK

## A spiced twist to greet 2026 with sweet, joyful abundance

**g**inger tres leches cake is a rich, spiced twist on a Latin American classic, perfect for New Year's dessert.

Infused with warm ginger and soaked in a trio of milks, it's a sweet, indulgent finish to the

Southern tradition of eating pork, greens and black-eyed peas for good luck.

More than just a treat, this cake celebrates abundance, warmth, and the joy of gathering loved ones to welcome the year ahead.

### Flavor tip

An overnight rest in the fridge provides maximum flavor and texture.



**Ginger tres leches adds a twist to a sweet indulgent finish to New Year's tradition.** NIKKI MILLER-KA/FOR USA TODAY NETWORK; AND GETTY IMAGES

### Time note

This cake requires at least 4 hours of chilling.

**Fresh beginnings:** Ringing in Jan. 1 with a toast to what's ahead

## Ginger Tres Leches Cake

### For the cake

- 1 cup flour
- 1 ½ teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons ground ginger
- ½ cup unsalted butter, softened
- 1 cup milk
- 3 large eggs
- 1 ½ cups sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 tablespoons grated fresh ginger

### For the tres leches mixture

- 12 ounces evaporated milk
- 12 ounces sweetened condensed milk
- 1 cup heavy cream

### For the whipped topping

- 1 ½ cups heavy cream
- 3 tablespoons powdered sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- Crystallized ginger, for garnish

**Yield:** 9 to 12 servings

Heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease an 8x8-inch baking dish.

In a medium bowl, whisk together flour, baking powder, salt and ground ginger.

In a large bowl, beat sugar and butter until light and fluffy.

Add grated ginger, then eggs one at a time, mixing well after each addition. Stir in vanilla.

Add flour mixture in batches, alternating with milk, mixing until just combined.

Pour batter into the prepared pan. Bake 25 to 30 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean.

In a medium bowl, whisk together evaporated milk, condensed milk and heavy cream.

When cake has cooled slightly, use a fork to poke holes evenly across the surface.

Pour milk mixture over the cake.

Cover and refrigerate at least 4 hours or overnight to allow the cake to absorb the liquid.

In a large bowl, whip cream, powdered sugar and vanilla until soft peaks form. Spread evenly over chilled cake.

Garnish with crystallized ginger before serving.



### Crystallized ginger

This little treat adds zing to a variety of baked goods and drinks – or it can be snacked on alone.

## Festive and delicious nonalcoholic drinks

**Mackensy Lunsford**  
Nashville Tennessean  
USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE

If you're skipping alcohol but still want something festive in your glass, there are sparkling options that actually deliver on flavor.

Stephanie Styll, co-founder of Killjoy Booze-free Beverage Shop in Nashville, recommends a few bottles that stand out from the usual cloying imitations.

Nonalcoholic wine, after all, has grown leaps and bounds since the days of sparkling grape juice.



**Some of the alcohol-free wines sold at Killjoy in Nashville.** NICOLE HESTER/THE TENNESSEAN

### Some of the best NA sparklers

**Prima Pavé Blanc de Blancs:** A super-dry Italian sparkler that clocks in at 0.0% ABV. Bright, crisp and layered, it drinks like the real thing.

**Noughty Sparkling Chardonnay:** Balanced and flavorful, this one leans more toward a traditional sparkling wine profile without being overly sweet.

**St. Buena Vida Sparkling White:** A newer offering that's clean, refreshing and made for easy sipping.



Sugar, butter and patience required for complex pastries

# Bluebird’s Kouign-amann

- 2 ½ teaspoons yeast
- 2 ¼ tablespoons sugar
- 2 cups warm water
- 6 and a scant ¼ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 pound butter, very cold (grated in two stages)
- 4 tablespoons soft butter (for greasing muffin tins)
- Nonstick spray, such as Pam
- Sugar-salt mix**
- 1 ½ cups sugar
- 1 ½ tablespoons salt

### Baking tip

Add a pinch of sugar and salt mixture inside muffin tins before adding dough for extra crunch.

**Yield:** A dozen

**Bloom the yeast:** In a large mixing bowl (5 to 6 quarts), combine the yeast, sugar and warm water. Let sit until foamy, about 5 minutes.

**Make the dough:** Add flour to the yeast mixture. Mix on medium-low speed (speed 2) with a stand mixer fitted with a dough hook for 4 minutes.

**First rise:** Spray a clean large bowl with nonstick spray. Transfer the dough to the bowl, cover and let rest at room temperature for 45 minutes. Refrigerate for 30 minutes.

**First lamination:** On a lightly floured surface (about 2 to 3 tablespoons flour), roll the dough into a rectangle about ¼ to ½ inch thick and slightly larger than a half sheet pan (about 18x13 inches). Grate ½ pound of very cold butter over the surface using the large holes of a box grater. Fold the dough into thirds, cover and refrigerate for 45 minutes.

**Second lamination:** Roll the dough out again to ¼ to ½ inch thick. Grate the remaining ½ pound butter over the dough. Fold into thirds and roll with the seam facing you.

**Repeat folds:** Repeat the process of rolling to ¼ to ½ inch thick, folding into

thirds, and turning the dough three more times (always keeping the dough in portrait orientation).

**Rest:** Wrap the dough and refrigerate for 2 hours, or overnight.

**Prepare pans:** Rub 4 tablespoons of soft butter into the cups of a standard muffin tin. Sprinkle about ½ cup of the sugar-salt mix evenly into the buttered cups.

**Shape pastries:** Cut the dough in half. Roll each half into a rectangle about ½ inch thick. Trim the edges, then cut into 4x4-inch squares. Fold the corners of each square toward the center to form a quatrefoil shape. Sprinkle each with about 1 teaspoon of the sugar-salt mix. Place each piece into a muffin cup.

**Proof:** Loosely cover and let proof at room temperature for 30 minutes.

**Bake:** Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Place a sheet pan on the rack two levels below your muffin tin to catch drips. Bake for 20 minutes, rotating pans halfway through.

**Finish:** Immediately unmold the pastries onto a wire rack to cool slightly. Serve warm. Dust with powdered sugar, if desired.

Sweet reflections: Savoring the flavors that mark the turning of the year

Elliott Harrell  
SPECIAL TO USA TODAY  
NETWORK

With his seven Michelin stars, chef Brandon Sharp first tasted kouign-amann while working at acclaimed fine-dining restaurant Gary Danko in San Francisco.

“I remember tasting it there and always wanting to make it,” he says. Now at his restaurant Bluebird in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, it’s his signature brunch pastry and one he says is perfect for a celebratory New Year’s Day morning meal.

“It’s an incredibly moist, rich, buttery, delicious pastry with this kind of, you know, tantalizing mix of sugar and salt and caramel crust around the outside,” he said of the treat.

A kouign-amann is a cousin of sorts to a croissant, as it uses a traditional laminated dough to get multiple flaky layers. Sharp has been fine-tuning his recipe for more than three years now. He said the secret to getting a light and airy pastry is to proof it for long enough — he recommends 20-25 minutes.

For the optimal caramelized crust around your kouign-amann, add more of the sugar and salt mixture to the inside of your mold or muffin tin. Some of the sugar will drip from the pan during baking, so make



Kouign-amann is a salty-sweet pastry. PHOTOS BY RYAN MOORE/PROVIDED BY BLUEBIRD; AND GETTY IMAGES

sure you have a baking tray underneath to catch any spills. Sharp says not putting the tray directly under your muffin tin, but a few rungs down, will ensure that the bottom of your kouign-amann gets caramelized, too.

### Festive toast

The result is bright, botanical and festive enough for New Year’s Eve — or any time you want to raise a glass without raising your blood alcohol.



GETTY IMAGES

For a simple upgrade, Styll recommends making a Wilfred’s Spritz by combining any of these nonalcoholic sparklers with Wilfred’s Bittersweet Orange & Rosemary Aperitif and adding a fresh rosemary sprig. Suddenly, you have a super-easy mocktail with holiday flair. Looking for something a little more celebratory? Styll suggests a spirit-free take on the classic French 75. Her NA French 75 keeps the sophistication while skipping the gin.

# NA French 75

**Yield:** 1 mocktail

1 ounce Little Saints St. Juniper

½ ounce fresh lemon juice

½ ounce simple syrup

3 ounces nonalcoholic sparkling wine

Combine and garnish with a lemon peel.





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## Fudge-martini pairing offers sweet taste of New Year style

These two New Year’s Eve desserts — one for the cookie plate and one for the glass — come from Phillip Ashley Rix, a two-time James Beard Award-nominated chocolatier whose “Perfect Turtle” once landed on Oprah’s coveted Favorite Things list.

Rix is, of course, devoted to chocolate. But he also has a thing for bubbly, which is what gives his champagne-strawberry white chocolate fudge its sparkle.

“I love something bright and light, even with a little tartness,” Rix said. “The sweet white chocolate adds something different. It’s not the typical dessert, bar or brownie.”

Paired with it is his espresso martini. It’s a visual match in the glass — Rix recommends a coupe — and a great flavor companion, too, with earthy, roasty espresso playing off the strawberries and white chocolate.

“It’s a riff on what might be the most popular cocktail on the planet right now,” he said. “It’s like having dessert and coffee, but your coffee’s got a little kick to it.”



**The espresso martini gets a modern makeover with freshly grated chocolate.** PROVIDED BY HARPER COLLINS

He recommends taking your time dusting the top of the drink artfully with cocoa powder or espresso.

But above all, have fun — the recipes were written for any level of expertise, he said.

“Honestly, get ready to show off for your friends,” he said. “They’ll be impressed.”



PHOTO BY REACTOR MEDIA/PROVIDED BY HARPER COLLINS; AND GETTY IMAGES

**Bright intentions:** Welcoming 2026 with warmth, hope and a little sparkle

# Strawberries & Champagne White Chocolate Fudge

- 1 cup chopped strawberries
- 2 ¼ cups granulated sugar, divided
- 1 cup champagne, divided
- ½ cup heavy cream
- ½ cup unsalted butter
- 1 ½ cups (8 ounces) white chocolate chips
- 7 ounces marshmallow creme
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ½ cup dried strawberries, loosely crushed (plus more for topping, optional)

Recipe from “For the Love of Chocolate” by Phillip Ashley Rix

**Yield:** 16 servings

In a small saucepan, combine the fresh strawberries, ¼ cup of the sugar, and ½ cup of the champagne. Cook over medium heat until the fruit has mostly broken down, stirring frequently, about 15 to 20 minutes.

Strain out the solids and reserve the strawberry syrup.

Line an 8x8-inch baking dish with parchment paper.

In a large saucepan, combine the remaining sugar, champagne, heavy cream, and butter. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until the sugar has dissolved and the mixture comes to a boil.

Reduce the heat to low and continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until the mixture reaches 238 degrees on a

candy thermometer, about 10 minutes.

Remove the pan from the heat and stir in the white chocolate chips until melted. Stir in the marshmallow creme, vanilla and dried strawberries until well combined.

Pour two-thirds of the mixture into the prepared baking dish and spread it out evenly. Mix the strawberry syrup into the remaining one-third of the fudge, then pour that into the baking dish. Drag a knife through the mixture to make a swirl pattern.

Refrigerate for at least 2 hours or until firm.

Lift the fudge out of the pan using the parchment paper and cut into 16 squares.

# Chocolate Espresso Cocktail

- 3 ounces premium vodka
- 2 ounces coffee liqueur, such as Kahlúa
- 2 ounces crème de cacao
- 2 ounces freshly brewed espresso, cooled
- Chocolate shavings, for garnish

Recipe from “For the Love of Chocolate” by Phillip Ashley Rix

**Yield:** 2 cocktails

Chill two martini glasses in the freezer for about 10 minutes.

Fill a cocktail shaker with ice cubes. Add first four ingredients to the shaker.

Secure the lid on the shaker and shake vigorously for about 15 to 20 seconds,

until the mixture is well-chilled and frothy.

Strain the mixture into the chilled martini glasses.

Garnish with chocolate shavings, or if you’re looking for a more filling treat, add a chocolate-dipped biscotti.

