By Nancy Gerlach, SuperSite Food Editor Emeritus, with Recipes from the SuperSite Staff

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To me, it hardly seems possible that another holiday season is almost upon us. It's the time of year that friends and family gather to enjoy each other's company, to reflect on the year that is passing, make resolutions for the upcoming one, and hopefully, eat much too much hot and spicy food and barbecue. The celebrations are both festive and serious and seem to be non-stop for the entire month. Ever wonder why there are so many in December?

The common thread that runs them is that they occur around the Winter Solstice, or Yule, that marks the beginning of winter in the Northern Hemisphere and summer in the Southern. Solstices happen when the sun is at its greatest distance from the celestial equator. In the winter this happens on either December 21 or 22, when the sun is shining directly over the Tropic of Capricorn and marks the longest night and shortest day of the year. The word solstice comes from an old Latin word meaning stop or to stand still, which is what the moon appears to

do on this night.

Early celebrations of Christmas are thought to have had their origins in the midwinter festivals held around the time of the Solstice. It was the Emperor Constantine who declared Christianity the official religion of Rome and afterward the faithful began observing the "Mass of Christ." The Mass was conducted at no particular time, and it centered on the life and deeds of Jesus, not his birth. No one knows the exact date of his birth, but it's probable that it didn't happen in December. It's written that shepherds were tending their flocks at night when he was born, and they would only be doing this during lambing time in the spring. In the fourth century, Pope Julius designated December 25 as the day of the birth and established Christmas as a celebration. Was it because non-Christians viewed the Solstice as the rebirth of the sun, or possibly was it because he wanted to lure them from pagan celebrations to their religious one?

Another holiday observed at this time of the year, is Hanukkah, or the Jewish Festival of Lights. This is an interesting religious holiday because it commemorates a military victory and unlike most Jewish holidays, this is one that is not mentioned in the Bible. The event happened in 165 BC when a small band of Jews led by Judah Maccabee defeated an army of Syrian Greeks to regain their religious freedom. It's celebrated for eight days from the 25th day of Kislev to the third day of Tevet on the Jewish calendar, and it always falls near the Winter Solstice. Light is the preeminent theme of Hanukkah which is appropriate at this time of the year. Central to this holiday is the lighting of a candle each night in the eight-branched candelabra called a Menorah. Since it falls near the Solstice when the days are short, candles are always welcome. Originally a minor holiday, it has now become a major celebration.

Kwanzaa, which is observed from December 26 to January 1, is a modern holiday with no ties to any religion. It was established in 1996 during a time of social and political upheavals, by Dr. Maulana Karenga, a college professor, who felt that the African American community needed a time for self-examination and to reflect on cultural values. Borrowing on several African harvest festivals, he established the celebration of Kwanzaa, Swahili for "first fruits of the harvest." The focal point for the gatherings is to reflect upon the Nguzo Saba or seven principles that have sustained Africans. Each day a family member lights a candle and discusses one of the principles that black Americans should live by: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith.

And finally, the oldest of holidays, New Year's, also occurs at the end of December. The event was first observed in Babylon 4000 years ago and celebrated the first phase, or crescent phase, of the moon on the first day of the spring equinox. In 153 BC however, the Roman senate declared January 1 to be the beginning of the new year. But at that time in history there was a

lot of "fiddling around" with calendars and again the date of the new year was floated to coincide with the Solstice. Julius Caesar established the Julian Calendar in 46 BC and again made January 1 the start of the year. But in order to synchronize his calendar with the sun, the previous year had to last for 445 days! Then in 567 AD the Council of Tours yet again moved the new year back to the Vernal Equinox in March. January 1 was finally designated as the first day of the new year when the Gregorian Calender was established by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 AD. During the Middle Ages, the church branded all celebrations of the new year as pagan, but as time passed, such celebrations became accepted. So even though it's the oldest holiday, it's only been celebrated in the Western countries for the last 400 years.

In addition to all these celebrations occurring around the Winter Solstice, each one has special comfort foods that we associate with the holiday. From *latkas* (potato pancakes) that are served on Hanukkah, black-eyed peas for luck on New Year's, and the wonderful African-inspired dishes that grace tables during Kwanzaa everyone has their favorite holiday foods. And that includes all of us here at Fiery Foods and BBQ SuperSite, although many of our comfort foods include hot, spicy, and smokin' ingredients. As a way of wishing you a very happy holiday, no matter what holidays you celebrate, everyone here wants to share a festive recipe with you.

Hot Cranberry Drink

This recipe is from Dr. BBQ, Ray Lampe, who says "why serve cranberries in a jelly when you can just drink them?" This is the perfect starter for a holiday dinner, and if your significant other isn't looking, add some vodka to this creation. This recipe is from Ray's book, *Dr. BBQ's Barbecue All Year Long!*
cookbook.

2 cups fresh or frozen cranberries
1 cup sugar
1/4 cup hot pepper jelly
7 whole cloves
1/2 cup fresh orange juice
1/4 cup fresh lemon juice

In a saucepan, cook the cranberries in 2 cups of water until they pop. Strain through a fine sieve, reserving the juice and discarding the skins. Set aside.

In a large saucepan, combine the sugar, pepper jelly, cloves, and 1 quart of water. Cook for 5 minutes over medium heat.
Add the orange and lemon juices and reserved cranberry juice; and heat thorough. Remove the cloves and serve hot.
Yield: 6 to 8 servings
Heat Scale: Medium

Ginger Curry Pumpkin Bisque with Peppered Croutons

We don't always end a holiday meal with pumpkin pie-sometimes we begin the feast with this spicy soup with its Caribbean island flavor. If you don't want to use pumpkin, any winter squash, such as butternut, acorn or Hubbard, will do. This is an easy recipe to prepare, but if you want an even quicker version, used canned pumpkin puree or a 12-ounce package or frozen cooked winter squash as a base. This recipe is from Dave's and my book, *The Spicy Food Lover's Bible*

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1 quart vegetable broth
4 cups diced fresh squash or one 15-ounce can pumpkin puree
2 tablespoons butter or margarine
1 tablespoon chopped ginger
1 cup chopped onions
1/4 teaspoon ground habanero chile
2 teaspoons hot curry powder
1/4 teaspoon ground coriander
1/4 teaspoon ground white pepper
Pinch of ground cloves
3 tablespoons orange juice, preferably fresh
1/4 teaspoon orange zest
2 tablespoons rum (optional)
Chopped green onions and peppered croutons for garnish

Peppered Croutons
3 slices of bread, crusts removed and cut in squares or 4 to 6 slices of a thin baguette cut in rounds
2 tablespoons butter or margarine
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 clove garlic, thinly sliced
1 teaspoon coarsely ground black pepper
1/4 teaspoon dried thyme, crumbled
1 ½ tablespoons freshly ground Parmesan cheese

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees F.

If using fresh squash, bring the broth to a rapid boil in a large saucepan over high heat. Add the squash, cover, and boil for about 10 minutes or until soft. Remove the squash and reserve some of the broth. Place the squash in a blender or food processor and puree until smooth, adding some of the broth if needed.

Otherwise, place the canned pumpkin puree, along with 3 cups of the broth, in a large stockpot.

Heat a small skillet over medium heat and add the butter or margarine; when it's melted, add the ginger and onion and saute until the onions are soft. Add the ginger-onion mixture, chile, curry, coriander, pepper, and cloves to the pumpkin puree. Simmer the bisque for 15 minutes. Meanwhile, make the croutons. Place the bread on a sheet pan and bake in the oven until toasted, turning once, about 10 minutes.
Heat a small saucepan over low heat, add the butter, and when the butter has melted, add the

oil, garlic, pepper, thyme, and sage. Simmer the mixture for 5 minutes to blend flavors, being careful that the butter does not brown.

Combine the butter mixture and the croutons in a bowl and toss to coat. Return them to the sheet pan, sprinkle the cheese over the croutons, and return them to the oven. Bake until the cheese browns, about 10 minutes.
Strain the soup, return to the stove, and heat through. Remove the soup from the heat; stir in the orange juice, zest and rum if using.
To serve, pour the bisque into a large soup tureen or ladle into individual bowls, and garnish with the onions and peppered croutons.
Yield: 4 to 6 servings
Heat Scale: Medium

Chile de Arbol Christmas Salad

This is my take on the popular Ensalada de Noche Buena (Christmas Eve Salad) that is served in Mexico. The jicama provides a nice crunchy texture to the salad, but if they are unavailable, use a crisp Granny Smith apple. For added color diced beets are sometimes added in the traditional salad. Pomegranates are in season this time of year, and the seeds add color as well as flavor to this holiday dish.

Dressing:
2 tablespoons orange juice, preferably fresh
1 tablespoon lime juice, preferably fresh
1 tablespoon white vinegar
1 clove garlic, finely minced
1 teaspoon sugar
1/2 teaspoon ground chile de Arbol
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon ground white pepper
1/2 cup vegetable oil

Salad:
2 oranges peeled and sectioned
1 banana, sliced
1 small jicama, peeled and diced
1/2 cup sliced strawberries
Lettuce, chopped
Garnish: Seeds from 1 pomegranate or pinon nuts or chopped walnuts

Combine all the ingredients for the dressing, except the oil, in a ceramic or glass bowl and allow to sit for 30 minutes to blend the flavors. Whisk in the oil in a slow stream and mix until creamy. Combine the fruits and vegetable in a bowl. Pour the dressing over the top and gently toss to mix.

Line plates or a serving platter with the lettuce and top with the fruit mixture. Garnish with the pomegranate seeds and serve.
Yield: 4 servings
Heat Scale: Mild

Smoked Prime Ribs of Beef

Dave DeWitt's mom always serve a rare standing prime rib roast for Christmas, but I'm going to change this to just the ribs, and not roasted, but smoked. Buy a large prime rib roast and cut away the center. Then slice the ribless roast into ribeye steaks to use in steak recipes throughout the SuperSite. Then slice the ribs apart so that more smoke will reach them. This recipe is from our book Barbecue Inferno. Note: This recipe requires advance preparation

8 large prime ribs
2/3 cup your favorite rub
Your favorite BBQ sauce.

Trim any excess fat off the ribs. Cover with the rub and massage the rub into the meat. Cover and let stand at room temperature for 1 hour.
Build a fire in the smoker and bring the smoke to 200 to 220 degrees F. Place the ribs on the grill or on racks and smoke for 4 2 hours, turning occasionally. One half hour before you remove the ribs from the smoker, brush the ribs all over with barbecue sauce.
Yield: 4 servings
Heat Scale: Medium

Green Bean Smoked Casserole

People often ask Dr. BBQ: "Do you smoke everything?" Not quite, but he's trying. Here is the classic Thanksgiving casserole transformed just a little. This is also from Ray's book, *Dr. BBQ's Barbecue All Year Long! Cookbook*
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The Casserole:
1 can green beans, drained and sliced lengthwise, drained
1 can or jar small whole onions
2 tablespoons diced pimiento
1 can cream of mushroom soup
1/4 cup chopped green New Mexican chiles

The Topping:
1/4 cup fine bread crumbs
1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese
2 tablespoons melted butter

Prepare the grill for 350 degree, indirect cooking with apple wood flavoring.

In a lightly buttered 1 1/2-quart casserole, combine green beans, onions, diced pimiento, mushroom soup, and green chiles. In a bowl, combine the topping ingredients and sprinkle it over the top of the casserole.

Place on the grate and smoke, uncovered, for 30 minutes.
Yield: 4 servings
Heat Scale: Mild

Potato Latkes

Potato pancakes, or *latkes*, are the most traditional dish that is served during Hanukkah. The texture varies, with some made with coarsely grated potatoes, some finely ground, and some are made with mashed potatoes. Adding ingredients such as herbs and vegetables is quite

common, but these Southwestern ingredients are not. Traditional
latkes
are served with applesauce, but if you want to garnish these, try sour cream or Mexican
crema
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2 cups coarsely grated potatoes
2 tablespoons coarsely grated onion
2 eggs, beaten
3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro
2 chipotle chiles en adobo, finely chopped
1/4 teaspoon salt
Vegetable oil for frying

Place the potatoes and onions in a strainer over a bowl and let stand for 10 minutes to let the liquids drain. Gently press to squeeze out as much moisture as possible. Mix in the eggs, flour, cilantro, chiles, and salt, and mix with a fork until a batter is formed.

Heat a skillet over medium-high heat and add the oil to a depth of 1/4-inch. When hot, drop a tablespoon of batter into the oil and press down gently on the cake. Fry until browned, turn and fry on the other side until crisp. Remove and drain before serving.
Yield: 4 servings
Heat Scale: Medium

Red Chile Pumpkin Chiffon Pie

Photo by Norman Johnson

Gwyneth Doland, writer for the SuperSite, shares her recipe for this spicy dessert. This fluffy pie is a lighter alternative to dense, rich pumpkin pie most of us are used to. It's served chilled, so the red chile kick comes as a pleasant contrast.

For the crust:
1 cups all-purpose flour
3 tablespoons unsalted butter
3 tablespoons lard or vegetable shortening
1 teaspoon sugar
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
3 to 6 tablespoons ice water

For the filling:
1 envelope (2 teaspoons) unflavored gelatin
1/4 cup very hot water
3 large eggs
2/3 cup sugar
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon nutmeg
1.2 teaspoon ground ginger
3 tablespoons (more or less) mild red New Mexican chile powder
1 1/4 cups canned pumpkin
1/2 cup heavy cream

To make the crust, combine the flour, sugar, and salt in a bowl and salt and stir to mix. Using a pastry blender, your hands or two butter knives, quickly work the butter into flour until it resembles coarse meal with some big, pea-sized chunks. Sprinkle the ice water 1 tablespoon at a time over the flour and mix with a fork or your hands, adding just enough water so that the mixture comes together and can be gathered into a ball.
Press the ball into a thick disc, wrap the disc with plastic, and refrigerate for 20 minutes

Remove the chilled dough and allow it to rest at room temperature for 5 minutes. Roll it out into a round 1/8 inch-thick and transfer it to a pie pan and flute the edges.

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees, and refrigerate crust for another 20 minutes.

Remove the crust and then prick it all over with a fork. Place a piece of aluminum foil over the bottom of the crust and weigh it down with dry beans.

Bake the crust for 10 minutes. Remove the foil and beans, lower the temperature to 350° and bake until the crust is golden, about 10 to 15 minutes. Cool the crust on a wire rack.

To prepare the filling, pour the hot water into a small bowl and sprinkle the gelatin over it, stirring vigorously until the gelatin is completely dissolved.
Place a mixing bowl and beaters in the freezer to chill.

Separate the eggs, putting the yolks into the top of a double boiler (or, if you don't have one, a large stainless steel bowl which you place over a pot of boiling water), and the whites into a mixing bowl.

Add 1/3 cup sugar to the yolks and whisk until the mixture is thick, creamy and pale yellow. Add the salt, cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, red chile and dissolved gelatin. (Don't worry about clumps in the gelatin-they'll dissolve when the mixture is heated.) Start heating the water in the double boiler, or if you're using a large bowl instead, set the bowl over a pan of boiling water, making sure the bowl doesn't actually touch the water.

Stir constantly until the mixture thickens considerably and thickly coats the back of a spoon.

Remove the yolk mixture from the heat and whisk in the pumpkin until combined. Set the bowl over another, larger bowl of ice water. Whisk the mixture about 5 minutes or longer, if you can. Remove the bowl from the ice water and chill in the refrigerator.

In the standing mixer (or using a hand mixer) beat the egg whites until it forms soft peaks. Slowly add the sugar and continue beating until the soft peaks become satiny and stiff. Scrape the whites out into a small bowl.

Using the chilled mixing bowl and beaters, whip the cream until medium peaks form.

Gently fold the pumpkin mixture into the whipped cream, then into the egg whites. Scoop the mixture into the prepared crust and chill, covered, for four hours or overnight.

Serve the pie garnished with additional whipped cream.
Yield: 8 servings
Heat Scale: Mild