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In this season of longing and hope, with much uncertainty still hanging over our heads, NCR requested that our readers share their favorite Christmas recipe and why it means so much to them.

Please find below responses from NCR readers. We hope that these recipes spark joy in this season.

Mincemeat Tarts

Nancy McGunagle of Bigfork, Montana, wrote in with her mincemeat tart recipe, which took years to perfect, trying to replicate her husband's memory of his Irish grandmother's tarts baked in a coal or wood stove in Cleveland, Ohio, in the 1930s.

Ingredients:

- 1 pack of Pillsbury pie crusts1 jar of Cross & Blackwells (or facsimile) mincemeat
- 1/2 cup of dried cherries or cranberries
- 1/2 cup chopped walnuts or pecans
- 1/4 cup brandy or rum
- Dash of grated nutmeg

Directions:

Oil cupcake tin cups. Preheat the oven to 425 degrees. In a small bowl pour rum/brandy over nuts and dried fruit. Mix and set aside. Roll out the crust on a floured board to about two inches thick. Use a 4.5 inch lid from a jar as a mold to cut out pastry cups. Empty mincemeat into bowl, add nuts and dried fruit. Mix well.

Place a scoop of mixture in each pastry cup. The recipe makes approximately 10 cups. Use a 1.5 inch lid to mold a pastry scrap for top decoration. Place tin in 425 degree oven for 15 minutes, then reduce heat to 325 degrees for 10 minutes. Remove from the oven. Cool on rack. Ease out of tins gently using a knife/fork. Enjoy plain or with a dollop of whipped cream.

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Marie's Lemon Extract Fruitcake

McGunagle wrote in again with another favorite Christmas recipe which reminds her of a stormy night in the 1950s when her eldest sister, Marie, had an emotional meltdown. Marie took this fruitcake, which she had proudly baked, and expressed her anger at a family member by tossing it over the porch rail into the backyard. "Horrified, my father and little brothers rushed outside, scooped it out of the mud, placed it on the kitchen table and reverently removed all of the debris clinging to it, thus saving it for the calm after the storm," McGunagle writes.

Ingredients:

- 1 lb. butter
- 2 1/2 c. sugar
- 6 eggs
- 1 (2 oz.) bottle lemon extract
- 4 c. all purpose flour
- 1 1/2 tsp. baking powder
- 1/2 tsp. salt

- 1/2 lb. candied cherries
- 1/4 lb. candied pineapple
- 1/4 lb. white raisins
- 4 c. chopped pecans

Directions:

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees. In a large mixing bowl, cream butter and sugar. Add eggs and then lemon extract. Mix well. Sift three times the flour, baking powder and salt. Add to the creamed mixture gradually. Fold in fruit and pecans. Bake in a greased and floured angel food cake pan for 1 to 1 1/2 hours, or until the cake tester inserted in the middle comes out clean. Let cool completely before slicing. Makes 16 to 20 servings.

Coleslaw

Alicia Heick, of Bismark, North Dakota, shares her mother-in-law's recipe for coleslaw. Her mother-in-law, Frances Heick, had the recipe passed down from her own mother.

Ingredients:

- 1 head of cabbage
- 1 medium onion
- 3/4 cup of Mazola oil (can use other oils, but this is the best)
- 3/4 cup of either white or yellow vinegar

- 1/2 cup of sugar

Directions:

Slice cabbage thinly and place in a bowl. Sprinkle the cabbage with ground pepper and salt to taste. Add thinly sliced onion to the bowl with cabbage. In another bowl, mix together oil and vinegar. Add sugar to the oil and vinegar mixture. It should have a tangy flavor, not too sweet or too oily. Once the cabbage is wet-looking or has weeped, add oil mixture to cabbage and onion and stir. Let sit at least 45 minutes before serving.

Wigilia

Chris Zarow, of Crestline, California, writes in with not a recipe, per se, but an experience. This Polish Christmas Eve tradition celebrates the beginning of Christmas. "Although I was born in California and had great-grandparents from Poland, I've never missed a Wigilia and I hope to never miss one for the rest of my life," Zarow writes.

The table setting includes a central candle, a plate holding oplatek (a wafer which will be shared by all), hay or straw under the tablecloth, as a reminder of the manger, and an extra place setting for the wanderer or stranger who may appear at the door, who is Christ himself.

The meal commences at the sighting of the first star, which the youngest in the group must identify. Then the host offers oplatek to each guest who breaks off a piece and exchanges Christmas wishes. Guests then offer oplatek to each other in turn. "This can look like a bit of chaos," Zarow writes. "However, it is at the sharing of the oplatek that Christmas actually begins."

The meal has 12 items or courses but is meatless in deference to the animals in the manger. The foods are simple but festive: soup (such as soupa migdalowa: almond soup) fish, (traditionally carp), pierogi (a type of filled dumpling) served with sour cream, sauerkraut, mushrooms, kutia (a cooked grain dish which includes poppy seeds, dried fruits and nuts, served with a honey sauce). Coffee and homemade desserts such as poppyseed and nut rolls complete the meal.

Baby Jesus Birthday Cake

Rose Marie Basque, of Omaha, Nebraska, tells of the family tradition of baking a birthday cake for Jesus. "The birthday cake has been the center of a Christmas celebration in our home and even in our church," Basque writes. "We would invite children to come for a Baby Jesus birthday party and serve the cake with ice cream. Each child would receive a party favor, often an ornament of the Holy Family, an angel, a star or other significant representation of the Christmas story."

Birthday cake flavors can vary depending on the desire of the celebrant, but Basque usually bakes a simple, white cake.

Ingredients:

- Any favorite recipe for cake
- White frosting
- Green decorating frosting
- Green sugar

Directions:

Make cake. Frost the cake with white frosting. Pipe the edge of the cake with green decorating frosting. Sprinkle green sugar sparingly over the top. Add small nativity figures. Light a candle to sing "Happy Birthday" to Jesus.

Kuba

Peter J. Comerford, of Portsmouth, Rhode Island, submitted a traditional Czech Christmas Eve dish. "A house redolent of garlic and mushrooms still means Christmas Eve to me, when we enjoy this dish with a nice piece of salmon," Comerford writes. "It reminds me of my late mother. On her last Christmas Eve, not long before she passed away, my sister made kuba and brought it to Mom in the nursing home. My daughters look forward to it now as well."

Ingredients:

- 1/2 cup dried mushrooms
- 1 3/5 cup cold water
- 1 cup pearl barley
- 1 cup water or vegetable broth
- 3 tbsp lard or butter, plus 1 tbsp for the casserole
- 2 large onions
- 3 to 6 cloves garlic to taste
- 1/2 tsp. ground cumin
- 1 tsp. dried marjoram
- salt, ground pepper

Directions:

The day before serving the recipe, soak the dried mushrooms in water for at least 2 hours, but preferably overnight; drain and squeeze lightly to remove excess water. Place the pearl barley in a bowl and cover with water. Let soak overnight.

The next day, drain the mushrooms, reserving the soaking liquid (it will be used to color the barley). Drain the barley and rinse in fresh water. Drain or pat dry to remove the excess moisture. SautÃ© the pearl barley in half the butter in a Dutch oven or large pot for a few minutes, until pearly. Add 1 cup of the mushroom soaking liquid. Once the liquid has been absorbed, add the remaining liquid and 1/2 cup of vegetable stock. Stir, reduce the heat and let simmer for 40 minutes until the barley

is tender. Stir occasionally and add more broth if needed.

Meanwhile, saut  the finely chopped onions in the remaining butter. Briefly saut  the coarsely chopped mushrooms; add the crushed garlic, salt, cumin, marjoram and freshly ground pepper.

Grease the baking dish with butter or lard and in it combine the barley with the remaining ingredients. Smooth out and bake in a preheated 350 degree oven for about 25 minutes, or until golden.



(Unsplash/Micheile)

Grandma Murray's Sugar Cookies

Frances Flaherty, of Missoula, Montana, writes of a family recipe for sugar cookies that has been passed down for at least five generations. "When my dad came home from World War II, having spent 27 months in a German prison camp, he went to visit his grandmother. After hugging her, he went straight for the cookie jar for these cookies. She was ready for him and the jar was full. My mom made these cookies

with us, we made them with our children and now we make them with our grandson."

Ingredients:

- 2 cups sugar
- 1 cup butter
- 1/2 cup sour cream
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2 eggs
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 4 to 4 1/2 cups flour

Directions:

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Mix sugar and butter. Add sour cream, vanilla and eggs. Mix thoroughly. Add soda, baking powder and flour. Do not overmix. Roll out dough on a floured board. Use cookie cutters to cut out shapes. If you are sprinkling with sugar, do that now. If you will frost the cookies then skip that step. Place the cookies on a baking sheet and bake for 10 minutes.

Best Ever Cranberry Salad

Fr. Chris Miller of Ventura County, California, submitted his mom's recipe for cranberry salad that has been in the family for decades.

Ingredients:

- 1 bag of fresh cranberries (approx 4 cups)
- 2 cups sugar
- 2 cups seedless red grapes, washed and halved (seeded, if necessary)
- 1 can pineapple tidbits, drained (roughly 10 ounce can)
- 1/2 cup chopped walnuts
- 1 cup whipping cream, whipped (Do not use Cool Whip or similar products)

Directions:

The night before serving, wash and cull cranberries, removing damaged berries. Coarsely chop berries. Mix sugar well with berries and let stand in refrigerator overnight. The next morning, drain berries. Sugar and cranberry juice mixture may be used for basis of holiday drink, if desired. Whip cream until peaks stand up. Mix all ingredients together. Enjoy.

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