



## Nino's Culinary Gifts for the Holidays

There's no gift as personal as one you've made yourself. For generations, baking and packaging tins of delicious homemade cookies were a family holiday tradition. There are however, some interesting and fun holiday culinary treats and gifts you CAN make without even turning on the oven, or investing a lot of time.

Depending on your budget, your time and your culinary aptitude, any one of these ideas make an excellent gift to a friend or relative that perhaps shares your interest and passion for cooking and great food.

Below, each gift idea is rated by its estimated relative cost, (*Minus Container*)

**\$** under 5 Dollars, **\$\$** 5 to 10 dollars, and **\$\$\$** over 10 Dollars

and ease of preparation: \* Easy, \*\* Medium, \*\*\* More challenging but worth it

Idea	Cost	Ease
Seasoning Salt (1 cup)	\$	*
Caramel Sauce (2 cups)	\$\$	**
Hot Fudge Sauce (2 cups)	\$\$	**
Herb Flavored Vinegars (2 Cups)	\$\$	*
Chocolate Clusters (per ½ lb)	\$\$	*
Flavored Vodka's (per 2 cups)	\$\$\$	*
Vanilla Extract (per cup)	\$\$\$	**
Vanilla Sugar(per pound)	\$\$	*
Clarified Cooking Butter (per cup)	\$\$	*
Biscotti Cookies (per pound)	\$\$	**
Chocolate Truffles (per pound)	\$\$\$	**
Basil Pesto (per cup)	\$\$\$	***
Meat Marinade (Mongolian) (per cup)	\$\$	**
Meat Rubs (per ½ cup)	\$\$	*

Packaging, and your own specially added touches, like a homemade label, a pretty bow and a colorful ribbon, can make all the difference. Glass containers, tins, and small baskets can be readily found at these retailers: Cost Plus World Market, Pier One Imports, Bed Bath and Beyond, Linens n' Things, and Organized Living.

# Recipes and Techniques

## Seasoning Salt (Your OWN Seasoning "Essence"...) **(Cost \$ Ease \*)**

This recipe is one of my favorites. Feel free to increase or decrease these ingredient amounts or substitute other herbs to make your own version.

Salt	1 lb
White Pepper, Ground	1 TBSP
Black Pepper, Ground	1 TBSP
Garlic Powder	1 tsp
Paprika, Spanish	1 TBSP
Oregano, Powdered	2 tsp
Basil, Dry, Crushed Fine	2 tsp
Thyme, Powdered	1 tsp

Combine all ingredients in a bowl and mix well. Makes 1 pound (2 cups)

## Caramel Sauce **(Cost \$\$ Ease \*\*)**

Granulated Sugar	1 lb
Water	½ cup
Cream of Tartar	1/4 tsp
Heavy Whipping Cream	2 cups
Salted Butter	1/3 stick
Vanilla Extract	2 tsp

In a medium size sauce pan, dissolve cream of tartar in water. Add sugar and stir to make a slush. Place pan over medium high heat. While heating, wash the sides of the pan down with a pastry brush dipped in clean water until there is no sugar mixture on the sides of the pan. Don't worry about how much water you use to do this, it will all boil off in the end. Continue to heat the mixture until it comes to a boil and cooks down until it is a medium color. When the medium amber color is achieved, reduce the heat to low and add the cream. Be careful as you add the cream that you do not let the mixture boil over and that you do not burn yourself from the rising steam. After all the cream is added, stir until a smooth sauce is achieved. The mixture may clump together at first but it will eventually dissolve together. Once smooth, remove the pan from the heat and allow to rest 10 to 15 minutes. Add the butter and the vanilla and stir in. The finished caramel sauce can be jarred warm or at room temperature. Yields 3 ½ cups

## Hot Fudge Sauce **(Cost \$\$ Ease \*\*)**

Use the caramel sauce recipe above with 2 changes. First, cook the sugar mixture ONLY until you see the faintest beginning of color. Add the cream then. Second, once the cream has been added and a smooth sauce is achieved, stir in 1 pound of semi-sweet chocolate chips. Once the chocolate chips have melted into the sauce, add the butter and vanilla. Yields 4 cups

## Herb Flavored Vinegars (Cost \$\$ Ease \*)

Purchase a glass bottle with a stopper. Depending on the size of the bottle, choose from among many different FRESH herbs. Basil, Thyme, Oregano and Rosemary make excellent choices. Arrange the branches of herbs in the **empty bottle**, base of stems at bottom of bottle. Depending on your taste, you may also choose to add a few cloves of peeled garlic, a small amount of red pepper flakes or even black peppercorns. Do not crowd the fresh herbs into the bottle but leave  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the interior volume for the vinegar. Choose from White (Distilled), Cider or Rice Wine Vinegar. (Red wine vinegar may also be used but it does not show off the colorful herbs and spices). Heat the vinegar over the stove or in a microwave oven until warm, (120 F), and pour into the bottles making sure to cover the tops of the herbs. Leave the bottles uncapped until the vinegar has cooled to room temperature. Cap the vinegars once cooled fully. You will begin to notice discoloration in the fresh herbs after a day or so. This is normal.

## Chocolate Clusters (Cost \$\$ Ease \*)

Chocolate is always a popular “can’t miss” culinary gift. Perhaps more importantly, here’s an idea which gives you the opportunity to clean out your cupboard of all those half cans and small bags of nuts, raisins and other dried fruits you may have stashed about. Start with 1 pound of coating chocolate, which you can purchase in the grocery store or many other specialty grocery retailers. Melt the chocolate slowly over a double boiler or in a microwave oven on the defrost setting. Once melted, add your favorite dried fruits or nuts. (A pounds worth is a good estimate) You may choose to use only one fruit or nut or a medley of different types. Popular choices are; Raisins, Currants, Dates, Almonds, Pecans, Walnuts, Cashews and Hazelnuts.

Stir the nuts into the chocolate until there is little if any melted chocolate left in the bottom of the bowl and the nuts are thoroughly covered in the chocolate.

Spoon tablespoon size portions of the chocolate covered fruit & or nut/s mixture onto a cookie sheet lined with waxed paper and allow to cool to room temperature before handling. When packaging, it is a good idea to wear latex gloves to ensure you don’t leave finger prints on the chocolate candies.

## Flavored Vodka (Cost \$\$\$ Ease \*)

A popular and visually attractive drink at many bars in popular restaurants, this gift, albeit more on the pricy side, is simple to make. Choose a clear glass container. If you can find one with a spigot at the bottom, it will allow the liquor to be tapped right into a cocktail glass. One of the most popular fruits to use is pineapple. You can also use fresh cherries. For pineapple, purchase a peeled and cored fresh pineapple and arrange either slices or chunks in the glass container in an attractive pattern, filling the jar to within 1 inch of the top with the fruit. Warm any brand “plain” vodka to approximately 100 F and pour over the pineapple to completely cover, plus one half inch. Allow the jar to remain uncovered until the vodka cools to room temperature, then apply the cover. The vodka will begin to absorb the flavor of the fruit in a few days and be ready to sample in about 2 weeks. The same procedure may be used for the cherries.

## Vanilla Extract (Cost \$\$\$ Ease \*\*)

Similar to the flavored vodka, this variation uses natural fermented vanilla beans to “extract” its flavor from the alcohol.

2 whole vanilla beans  
1-1/2 cups mild brandy  
1/2 cup water  
1 cup granulated sugar

In a 3-cup glass container with a tight-fitting lid, combine the vanilla beans with the brandy. Cap and allow to sit at room temperature about 2 to 3 weeks.

The vanilla beans may be left in the liquid if desired, otherwise, remove the beans and strain liquid through a double layer of cheesecloth into a bowl.

In a medium saucepan, combine the water and sugar over medium heat. Bring to a boil, stirring constantly until sugar dissolves. Remove from heat and cool. Stir into vanilla mixture. Pour mixture into a bottle; cap and allow to sit at room temperature 1 month.

Yield: 2 cups of extract. Use as you would store bought vanilla.

## Vanilla Sugar (Cost \$\$ Ease \*)

Used by discriminating pastry chefs around the planet, this “gourmet sugar” will be as appreciated for its wonderful aroma as for its sophisticated taste and can be used for making pastries, brewed coffee, iced tea, or can even be sprinkled over fresh cut fruit. Glass containers are visually the best container to use as the recipient can see the vanilla beans in the sugar. To make this product, for every one pound of granulated sugar, use one 6 inch vanilla bean cut in half lengthwise, then widthwise to make 4 pieces. Toss the sugar and the beans together briskly. Some of the tiny vanilla beans will disperse in the sugar and add to the unique look of this sugar. Pour the entire mixture, including whole beans, in the jar and close the container. As the sugar is used, more plain granulated sugar can be added to restock the jar, until another one pound has been added to the original mix. Shake the jar after each addition.

## Clarified Cooking Butter (Cost \$\$ Ease \*)

Clarified butter is used by chefs to sauté and make various sauces. The “clarified” butter, also called Ghee, is the result of separating and extracting the pure butter fat away from the water, salt and milk solids which make up whole butter. This process allows the butter to be heated without burning or browning, creating an undesirable color and flavor. To make clarified butter, simply place one pound of butter in a microwave safe bowl. Place the butter in the microwave and heat one minute at a time, until the butter has completely melted and it just begins to froth and bubble up. DO NOT STIR the butter as it will take longer to separate. Remove the liquid butter and allow it to rest for 20 to 30 minutes in the bowl. The butter will separate. Carefully skim the white froth off of the top of the yellow butter fat, then, using a tablespoon or shallow ladle, skim off the clarified butter into your storage container (clear glass or plastic is recommended). Be careful not to dip into the watery, milky liquid below the fat as you will discard this liquid later.

## Biscotti Cookies (Italian “Biscotti d’ Anici”) (Cost \$\$ Ease \*\*)

These “twice baked” cookies are a popular morning or late evening pastry and are very popular with coffee, espresso or cappuccino. They store very well in a sealed container (I recommend an attractive tin) and therefore can be made many weeks in advance of your gift giving. Yields approximately 4 dozen 4” x ½” Cookies

### INGREDIENTS:

1/2 cup Butter  
1 1/3 cups Sugar  
1/2 tsp Salt  
1 Zested Orange  
1 Zested Lemon  
1 Tbsp. Anise Seed  
3 extra large Eggs  
3 cups All Purpose Flour  
1 Tbsp. Baking Powder  
1/2 tsp. Baking Soda  
2 cups sliced Almonds, toasted  
1/2 cup Pistachio pieces

### DIRECTIONS:

1. Pre-heat oven to 325 F.
2. Beat together butter, sugar, salt, lemon and orange zest and anise seed until light.
3. Add eggs, one at a time, blending after each addition.
4. Stir in the flour, baking powder, baking soda and nuts.
5. Divide finished dough in three sections.
6. With buttered fingers, shape each portion into a log approximately 1 1/2 inch in diameter and place on a lightly greased cookie sheet. Repeat with the other two portions and space logs at least 4 inches apart.
7. Using palms, flatten each log to a 1 inch thickness.
8. Bake 25 minutes rotating cookie sheet half way through the baking.
9. Remove loaves from the oven and allow cooling.
10. Using a thin, sharp bladed knife or serrated knife, cut logs in approximately 1 inch wide cookies at a 45 degree angle.
11. Lay slices, cut side down on a cookie sheet and re-bake at 275 F an additional 45 minutes or until very dry. Remove cookies from the oven and allow cooling. Cookies may be dipped in chocolate or dusted with powdered sugar.
12. Store cookies in an air tight container.

## Chocolate Truffles (Cost \$\$\$ Ease \*\*)

SERVING INFO: Approx. 24 - 1 inch round truffles

### INGREDIENTS:

- 1 cup Heavy Cream
- 1/4 cup granulated Sugar
- 1/2 stick Salted Butter
- 1 lb. Semi-sweet Chocolate, cut in small pieces
- 1 Tbsp. Bailey's Cream Liqueur, Rum, Frangelico, or Grand Marnier

### DIRECTIONS:

1. Bring cream and sugar to a scald.
  2. Stir in butter.
  3. Stir in chocolate.
  4. Stir in liqueur.
  5. Refrigerate slightly, bring to room temperature, whip if desired to create a lighter truffle filling or leave as is for a chewy version.
  6. Pipe or scoop out into a 1 inch ball. Refrigerate.
- Options: Roll finished, refrigerated chocolate truffles in melted coating chocolate, ground nuts of your choice or in cocoa powder. Serve.

## Basil Pesto (Cost \$\$\$ Ease \*\*\*) Yield 9 oz or 1 ¼ cup

Pesto is a very popular Italian condiment. Used as a seasoning in Minestrone, it is also an excellent spread on toasted croutons, with fresh diced tomato and shaved parmesan cheese (Bruschetta), and can be a wonderful condiment spread for sandwiches containing poultry such as roast chicken or turkey. Package your pesto in an air tight (non-reactive container) like glass or plastic. Pesto keeps well under refrigeration for up to 3 to 4 weeks. It also freezes well and can easily last 6 months or more in your freezer.

- |         |                        |
|---------|------------------------|
| 2 TBSP  | Garlic Cloves, Fresh   |
| 4 cups  | Basil, Fresh Leaf      |
| ½ cup   | Pine nuts, Toasted     |
| ¼ tsp   | Ground Black Pepper    |
| 2/3 cup | Grated Parmesan Cheese |
| 2 tsp   | Fresh Lemon Juice      |
| ¾ cup   | Ex. Virgin Olive oil   |
| 1 tsp   | Kosher Salt            |

### Procedure

1. Using food processor with s-blade, add basil and garlic cloves and pine nuts and blend until smooth.
2. Add parmesan cheese and pulse until incorporated into basil mixture.
3. While blending, add olive oil in a steady stream until well blended into mixture.
4. Add lemon juice and blend in.
5. Add salt and pepper and blend in.
6. Taste and adjust seasoning if necessary.

Package, minimizing air in container to minimize oxidation.

## Meat Marinade (Mongolian BBQ Marinade) (Cost \$\$ Ease \*\*)

An excellent marinade for pork, chicken or even lamb. Baste and marinate smaller cuts or chops 4 to 6 hours before grilling and larger pieces of meat (1 to 2 lbs or more) 8 hours to overnight, before roasting. Additional marinade can be basted on the meats while cooking for additional flavor. Recipe Yields 1 ½ cup

1 cup	Hoisin Sauce
1 TBSP	Brown Sugar
1 ½ TBSP	Soy Sauce
1 ½ TBSP	Sherry Vinegar
1 ½ TBSP	Rice Wine Vinegar
1 ea	Green Onion (Stalk, minced)
1 tsp	Tabasco Sauce
1 ½ tsp	Lee Kum Kee Black Bean Chili Sauce
1 ½ tsp	Ginger, Fresh Grated
1 ½ TBSP	Garlic, Fresh Minced
¾ tsp	White Pepper, Ground
¼ cup	Cilantro, Fresh, Chopped
1 TBSP	Sesame Oil

Combine all ingredients in a non-reactive bowl (glass or plastic), and mix well. Like pesto, package in an air tight (non-reactive container) such as glass or plastic. The marinade can keep well, refrigerated for up to 3 to 4 weeks. This marinade also freezes well and can easily last 6 months or more in your freezer.

## Meat Rubs (Cost \$\$ Ease \*)

Makes approximately 1 cup

Like marinades, meat rubs are very popular seasoning for steaks and roasts alike. This rub recipe is rather universal and can be used for beef, chicken, pork and lamb. To use, apply the rub to the uncooked meat liberally, and allow the meat to rest. Use the marinate time guide to estimate the amount of time necessary to flavor your meats.

4 TBSP	Spanish Paprika
2 TBSP	Chili Powder, Dark
2 TBSP	Ground Cumin
2 TBSP	Dark Brown Sugar
1 TBSP	Granulated Sugar
2 TBSP	Salt, Kosher
1 TBSP	Oregano, Dry
1 tsp	Basil, Dry
1 tsp	Garlic Powder
1 TBSP	Black Pepper, Ground
1 TBSP	White Pepper, Ground
1 tsp	Cayenne Pepper, Ground

Place all ingredients in a mixing bowl and blend together well. A food processor is recommended. Package the finished rub in an air tight jar or tin. The rub keeps well for 6 to 12 months at room temperature in a dry environment.