MY SPICE DRAWER KNOWS It's Fall



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There is a moment every year when I realize summer is over.

It isn't the calendar. It isn't the first football game. It isn't even the first morning I have to reach for a sweater.

It happens when I open my spice drawer.

As I search through the little jars, I realize the seasons have changed. No longer am I reaching for fresh basil, rosemary, and mint. Almost overnight, I find myself longing for the taste and smell of cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, and cloves.

It all happens so quickly. Just yesterday, I was basking in the summer sun and sipping a mojito. Well, seriously, at my age, I was probably sitting under an umbrella, dreaming about a mint-laden mojito. Either way, Mother Nature has played her little trick on me once again.

The season has changed, and I fight it every year. I dread the smell of pumpkin when I walk into the grocery store wearing my shorts. The jack-o'-lanterns seem to snarl at me from their displays while, inexplicably, a poinsettia is already standing in the background.

A poinsettia! In September! How can this be?

I am simply not ready for Halloween, much less Christmas, when I am still wearing sandals. But eventually, I have to admit that two-thirds of the year is gone. I take a deep breath, put away my summer attitude, and settle into fall.

And once I do, I remember why I love it. The kitchen changes first. The light seems softer. The meals become heartier. The Dutch oven comes out of hiding. Butter begins to brown. Cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, and cloves take their places on the counter.

Suddenly, the house smells wonderful. There is something about the smell of fall cooking that seems to call people into the kitchen. You can be sitting in another room, minding your own business, when the aroma of browned butter, roasted garlic, curry, or cinnamon finds you.

Suddenly, you are standing in the kitchen, and one of my grandchildren pops in.

"What are you making?" It is one of my favorite questions.



THE SMELL THAT BRINGS EVERYONE HOME

Living in the Texas Panhandle, we are accustomed to big things.

Big skies. Big wind. Big steaks. Big opinions about football and, at my house, big holiday meals.

But I have come to realize that some of the most memorable things in a kitchen are actually quite small.

A pinch of cinnamon. A little nutmeg. A sprig of rosemary. A pat of butter melting in a skillet. Or a recipe written in someone's familiar handwriting. Those little things have a way of holding enormous memories.

I can smell something baking and be transported instantly—to my mother's kitchen, my grandmother's kitchen, or a holiday from years ago.

That is the remarkable thing about food. A single aroma can take us somewhere we haven't been in decades and bring back people, conversations, and moments we thought time had tucked away. And isn't that one of the reasons we cook?

Of course, in my kitchen, there is also the practical matter of feeding everyone who wanders in to investigate.

PUMPKIN—YES, PUMPKIN

Now, I have already admitted that I resist the arrival of pumpkin season. But there are some things worth surrendering to.

A savory pumpkin soup is one of them.

Add curry, ginger, a little cayenne, and some good chicken

stock, and suddenly pumpkin becomes sophisticated. It is warm, comforting, and just the thing for a crisp fall evening.

I must admit, however, that my favorite way to use pumpkin is in a dessert.

Give me a pumpkin cheesecake with a gingersnap crust, and I will happily forgive the grocery store for displaying Christmas decorations before Halloween has even arrived.

Another love of mine is the humble sweet potato. Once again, I love it in a savory presentation, but I absolutely adore it sweet.

Every year, I publish my niece Leia's sweet potato casserole recipe. It would not be Thanksgiving without it!

This is one of those dishes that manages to straddle the line between side dish and dessert. With sweet potatoes, butter, sugar, and a pecan topping, it is practically wearing two hats.

I promise this will become a staple on your holiday table. And if someone asks whether it is a vegetable or a dessert, I suggest you simply change the subject. Some Thanksgiving questions are better left unanswered.

THEN COMES THANKSGIVING

Thanksgiving is my favorite time of year for food and family.

The turkey goes into the oven. The pies begin appearing. Someone is making dressing. And someone—there is always someone—is eating something that was clearly intended for dinner.

I have cooked enough Thanksgiving dinners to know that perfection is highly overrated.

The turkey may be a little dry. The rolls may be a little overdone. The gravy may need emergency intervention. But nobody will remember any of that.

They will remember sitting around the table. They will remember laughing. They will remember who was there.

Those are the reasons I fell in love with cooking in the first place. The memories made around a table are often more lasting than anything we serve on it.

Over the years, I have learned that a successful holiday meal isn't measured by the number of dishes, the perfection of the gravy, or whether the soufflé rises as it should.

It is measured by the people who gather, the stories they tell, and the time they spend together.

And, of course, by whether there are enough leftovers for a turkey sandwich the next day.

AND THEN, SOMEHOW, IT IS CHRISTMAS

Thanksgiving leftovers disappear. The turkey sandwich has its moment. The refrigerator finally has room again.

And then Christmas arrives. And somewhere between Thanksgiving and Christmas, I realize that the very best part of the season isn't what's cooking. It's who comes into the kitchen when they smell it. And for that, I am grateful.

FALL RECIPES

▼ *Every Holiday needs a little Spice*

Curried Pumpkin Soup

Serves 6

This velvety soup gives pumpkin a savory makeover with curry, ginger, and just a hint of cayenne.

3 T. butter
1 medium onion, chopped
2 tsp. curry powder
½ tsp. ground ginger
Pinch of cayenne pepper
1 can (15 ounces) pumpkin purée
4 C. chicken or vegetable stock
1 C. half-and-half (I use fat-free half-and-half)
Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
1 tsp. fresh lemon juice
Toasted pumpkin seeds and cream, for garnish

1. Melt the butter in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add the onion and cook for 5–7 minutes, until softened.
2. Add the curry powder, ginger, and cayenne. Cook for 1 minute, stirring constantly, until fragrant.
3. Stir in the pumpkin purée and stock. Bring to a gentle simmer and cook for 20 minutes.
4. Using an immersion blender, purée until smooth. Alternatively, carefully blend in batches in a countertop blender.
5. Stir in the half-and-half. Season with salt and pepper, and add the lemon juice just before serving.
6. Ladle into bowls and garnish with a swirl of cream and toasted pumpkin seeds.

Cinnamon-Spiced Pecans

Makes about 4 cups

These little pecans are perfect for Thanksgiving—or any fall gathering when you need something to put out with a cocktail while everyone is asking, "When are we eating?"

4 C. pecan halves
3 T. butter, melted
⅓ C. brown sugar
1 tsp. ground cinnamon
¼ tsp. cayenne pepper
½ tsp. kosher salt

1. Preheat the oven to 325°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.
2. Combine the pecans, melted butter, brown sugar, cinnamon, cayenne, and salt in a bowl. Toss until evenly coated.
3. Spread the pecans in a single layer on the prepared baking sheet.
4. Bake for 15–18 minutes, stirring once or twice. Watch carefully toward the end to prevent burning.
5. Allow to cool completely before serving. The pecans will become crisp as they cool.

Homemade Pumpkin Pie Spice

Makes approximately ¼ cup

Why buy a jar when you can make your own? This blend is wonderful in pumpkin pie, muffins, quick breads, and all sorts of fall desserts. It also makes a thoughtful hostess gift.

3 T. ground cinnamon
2 tsp. ground allspice
2 tsp. ground ginger
2 tsp. ground nutmeg
1½ tsp. ground cloves

1. Combine all the spices in a small bowl and stir until evenly blended.
2. Transfer to a small, clean glass jar or another airtight container. A small funnel makes this job much easier.

3.Store in a cool, dry place at room temperature.

The mixture will keep for several months, although its aroma will gradually fade over time.

Tie a pretty ribbon around the jar and pair it with a freshly baked pie for a delicious homemade gift.

Leia's Sweet Potato Casserole

A McKinley Family Thanksgiving Tradition

This sweet potato casserole has earned a permanent place on our holiday table. With its buttery filling and crunchy pecan topping, it may be a side dish, but I won't argue with anyone who saves room for it as dessert.

4 large sweet potatoes, peeled and cubed
½ C. granulated sugar
2 large eggs, well beaten
½ tsp. salt
4 T. butter
½ C. evaporated milk
1 tsp. vanilla extract
½ tsp. ground cinnamon
½ tsp. ground nutmeg

For the Topping

1 C. brown sugar
⅔ C. all-purpose flour
6 T. butter, softened
1 C. chopped pecans

Prepare the sweet potatoes

1. Preheat the oven to 325°F. Lightly grease a 9-by-13-inch baking dish.
2. Place the peeled, cubed sweet potatoes in a large pot of boiling water. Cook until tender, then drain thoroughly.
3. Transfer the sweet potatoes to a large mixing bowl. Beat with an electric mixer until smooth.
4. Add the sugar, eggs, salt, butter, evaporated milk, vanilla, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Mix until thoroughly combined.
5. Spread the mixture evenly in the prepared baking dish.

Prepare the topping

1. In a medium bowl, combine the brown sugar and flour.
2. Cut in the softened butter until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs.
3. Stir in the chopped pecans.
4. Sprinkle the topping evenly over the sweet potato mixture.
5. Bake for approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour - or until heated through and the topping is lightly browned. It takes longer if the casserole has been in the refrigerator. Try to bring it to room temperature before baking.

Make-ahead tip: The sweet potato mixture can be frozen before baking, with or without the topping. Thaw in the refrigerator before baking and allow additional baking time if necessary.

Pumpkin Cheesecake

with a Gingersnap Crust

A rich, creamy pumpkin cheesecake with a buttery gingersnap crust and toasted pecans. This is pumpkin season at its most persuasive.

Becky's tip: I buy my gingersnaps at World Market. They are thin, crisp, and delicious.

For the Crust

½ C. butter, melted
1½ C. finely crushed gingersnap cookies
½ C. chopped pecans, toasted

For the Filling

24 oz. cream cheese, softened to room temp.
1½ C. packed light brown sugar
1 can (15 oz) pumpkin purée
4 large eggs, at room temperature
¼ C. sour cream
2 T. all-purpose flour
2½ tsp. pumpkin pie spice
½ tsp. ground cinnamon
¼ tsp. salt
1 T. Mexican vanilla extract

For the Vanilla Whipped Cream

2 C. heavy whipping cream, chilled
2 tsp. Mexican vanilla extract
Sugar, to taste, if desired

Prepare the crust

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F.
2. To toast the pecans, spread them on a baking sheet and bake at 350°F for 7–8 minutes, watching carefully to prevent burning. Allow them to cool.
3. Combine the melted butter, crushed gingersnaps, and toasted pecans in a small bowl.
4. Press the mixture firmly into the bottom of a buttered 9 inch springform pan.
5. Bake for 10 minutes. Remove from the oven and cool on a wire rack.

Make the filling

1. In a large bowl, beat the softened cream cheese on low speed until very smooth.
2. Gradually add the brown sugar, mixing until incorporated.
3. Add the eggs one at a time, beating after each addition.
4. Add the pumpkin purée and mix just until blended.
5. Scrape down the sides and bottom of the bowl with a rubber spatula to ensure the ingredients are evenly incorporated.
6. Add the sour cream, flour, pumpkin pie spice, cinnamon, salt, and vanilla. Mix until smooth.
7. Pour the filling into the prepared crust and place the springform pan on a baking sheet. For extra moisture in the oven, place a separate pan of hot water on the bottom rack.
8. Bake for approximately 60 minutes, or until the edges are set and the center still moves slightly when the pan is gently shaken.
9. Turn off the oven. Prop the oven door slightly ajar with a wooden spoon and allow the cheesecake to cool in the oven for 1 hour.
10. Remove the cheesecake, cover, and refrigerate for at least 12 hours or overnight before serving.

Make the vanilla whipped cream

1. Beat the chilled heavy cream and Mexican vanilla in a cold mixing bowl until soft peaks form.
2. Add sugar to taste, if desired, and continue beating until the cream reaches your preferred consistency.
3. Serve alongside the cheesecake or pipe around the edges for a festive presentation. *AW*

Becky's serving suggestion: A scattering of toasted pecans and a generous dollop of Mexican vanilla whipped cream make this cheesecake worthy of a place at the center of your holiday table.