

Baking for the holidays? A checklist of pantry must-haves

Keep these ingredients in your pantry year-round and you'll be on track to bake up a storm this holiday season.

The baking gurus at Nielsen-Massey Vanillas offer this checklist of must-have items to help ensure your pantry is well-stocked for holiday baking:

- **Flour** - Some type of flour is the foundation of most baking. Your pantry should always have a supply of all-purpose white baking flour, but don't forget to add some other common, useful varieties like whole wheat, unbleached or semolina.

- **Sweeteners** - Refined white sugar, of course, is a reliable stand-by for sweetening any recipe. But many holiday recipes may call for alternative sweeteners like confectioner's sugar, maple syrup, brown sugar or honey. And, if you're baking for folks with dietary restrictions, you'll need artificial sweeteners. Many brands of artificial sweeteners now offer varieties specifically designed for use in baking.

- **Extracts** - Holiday baking cries out for certain flavors, like peppermint, almond, chocolate and vanilla. You can find an extract for virtually every flavor under the sun, but keeping an ample supply of the staples, like



Nielsen-Massey Vanillas, will ensure you have the perfect flavoring on hand for a variety of dishes - from holiday baked goods to main courses and side dishes. The family-run company uses a proprietary cold extraction process that slowly and gently draws the delicate and distinctive flavor from the vanilla beans.

- **Spices** - Certain spices just speak to the holiday season, but they're also use-

ful throughout the year. Keep your pantry stocked with holiday-appropriate spices like cinnamon, allspice, ground ginger, nutmeg and cloves.

- **Fruits and nuts** - While some recipes may call for fresh fruits and nuts, others will require dried varieties. Walnuts, almonds, pecans, raisins, candied ginger and even dried apricots and cranberries are all good starting points for a well-stocked holiday pantry.

- **Grains** - What would oatmeal raisin cookies be without the oatmeal? Holiday recipes often call for grains and cereals, including oatmeal, cornmeal and bran.

- **Leavening** - Many cookies don't require a leavening agent or stabilizer, but cakes and breads may, so include yeast, baking soda and baking powder in your pantry.

- **Shortening** - Vegetable oil, shortening and lard are staples of baking.

- **Milk** - You may not use it at any other time of year, but holiday baking often calls for evaporated milk. Sweetened condensed milk is also incorporated in many recipes. A can or two of each, purchased ahead of the holidays, will ensure you don't have to make a special trip to the grocery store for this less-used ingredient. (BPT)

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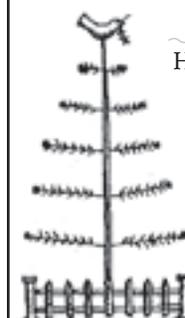
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Secrets of building a great gift basket

Giving a great gift basket is like bestowing a buffet of gifts on your loved one, and when the well-put-together gift basket is opened, well, that's a magical moment. Beneath the pretty decorations lie enchanting mysteries that emerge one-by-one to the delight of the recipient.

The personal aspects of a gift basket are also endearing. You can customize a gift basket to the occasion (holiday, birthday, retirement, etc.) and tastes of the recipient, and taking the time to do so shows your thoughtfulness and caring. Building a great gift basket can be fun and easy. The gift experts at Cracker Barrel Old Country Store offer some advice for putting together a gift basket that will charm any recipient:

The first steps

Begin by deciding what to put in the gift basket - packaged food, gourmet coffees, collegiate items, apparel, candles, personal care items like soaps or lotions, cooking utensils, books, jewelry, home decor items, gardening tools, ornaments, picture frames, etc. Practically any hobby or area of interest can be an inspiration for a gift basket. Base your choice on the



recipient's personality and interests.

Next, choose a container. Baskets, of course, are the classic container, but don't overlook other options, especially if they fit the overall theme you've chosen. For example, load a toy football helmet with items inspired by his favorite football team. A large stockpot can be

ideal for holding cooking utensils for a foodie or budding chef. A planter makes a useful and decorative container for gardening tools.

Arranging items

Once you've chosen the perfect container, think about how you'll arrange the items that go in it. First, add some decorative shredding (available in craft stores, or make your own with colored paper and a paper shredder) to help stabilize items in the container and make it look even more attractive. Then, follow these rules of thumb for arranging items:

- Place tallest items in the back. If you're using a round container, choose a side to serve as a visual 'back.'

- Moving forward, stair step the rest of your items from tall to short. It's OK if the rows are not perfectly straight or even. In fact, a little variance in the arrangement will make the basket look even more appealing.

- Be sure to place packaged items with the most interesting side facing forward so it's immediately visible. For example, if you've included a bag of the recipient's favorite coffee, make sure the brand name is showing so he or she will be able to tell at a glance what's in the basket. →



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Kaufman Field Guide To Nature Of New England by Kenn and Kimberly Kaufman – an essential reference guide for nature lovers living in or visiting New England. With more than 2000 color photos the Kaufmans help you identify everything from the sky to the bedrock – constellations, habitats, trees, flowers, birds, mammals, insects, reptiles, and rocks all in one handy volume.

The Portrait Gallery: Governors And Early Leaders Of New Hampshire by Russell Bastedo, NH State Curator 1997-2009 – using the portraits on display in the NH State House in Concord (and included here in black & white) as a starting point, the book offers a history of New Hampshire via brief biographies of the chief executives and governors whose painted portraits all hang in the gallery.

Monty Python's Flying Circus: Complete And Annotated – this massive 875 page volume has the complete script of all 45 episodes, over 2000 color photos and illustrations, and a thousand insightful annotations – everything the obsessive fan could want.

Santa Is Coming To New England – by Steve Smallman – "From Andover To Peterborough, from Shelburne to Manchester, from Portland to Providence, and all the places in between, Santa and his sleigh visited every house in New England" - this new picture book for children brings Santa right home.



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■ Be careful not to completely hide any items. It's fine to have things peeping through here or there, but avoid burying anything on the bottom. Buried items could potentially get lost and tossed out with the shredding.

■ If you need to hold items in place, secure them using some glue lines or glue dots (also available in craft stores.) Fitting everything snugly is the key.

The finishing touches

Once your basket is artfully filled, place the entire container in a large cellophane bag. Gather the bag above the contents of the basket, then tie a bow at the narrowest part of the gathered bag. For smaller containers, pull the corners of the bag under the container and tape them. Trim any excess bag at the top.

You can either hand-deliver your gift basket - which gives you the instant gratification of seeing the surprise and happiness on your loved one's face - or ship it if that's more convenient and practical. When shipping, be sure to package your basket securely. If you purchase a gift basket at Cracker Barrel, they will pack it for you at no extra cost and you just pay the actual shipping fee.

If creating a gift basket yourself is not your cup of tea the gift gurus at Cracker Barrel can do it for you based on your specifications. Visit shop.crackerbarrel.com to learn more. (BPT)

8th annual Currier & Ives Cookie tour



Kick off the holiday season by participating in the 8th annual Currier & Ives Cookie tour. It will be running from 11:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. on Saturday, December 8. There are currently a dozen stops that will bring you to Fitzwilliam, Jaffrey, Rindge, Troy, Marlborough, Peterborough, and Swanzey. Tickets are \$10.00 per person, and good for all locations. The ticket includes a homemade cookie and refreshment at each stop, as well as recipe cards for the treats offered. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to Santa's House, a non-profit organization that provides clothing and toys to Jaffrey residents in need. Visit our local businesses to see how they decorate for the holidays and also what they have to offer throughout the year. www.currierandivescookietour.com



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New tech twists on classic toys

Holiday gift trends are always evolving and this year, what's old is new again, but now with a modern, tech twist. Every kid wants to have the coolest gift to show off to their friends at school. So get a head start on holiday gift buying before the most popular toys fly off the shelves. Here are some surefire hot sellers this holiday season:

■ ABCs

Traditional ABC blocks have been around since the 1600s, so an upgrade is long overdue. The VTech Alphabet Activity Cube builds on this classic learning toy by adding an electronic learning component that's super easy to use. The blocks can be stacked on the top of the cube or they can be inserted into the side slot so kids can learn more about each letter. The toy also features five piano keys, a number keypad, and telephone. It's a great way to make learning the alphabet fun! Learn more at <http://vtechkids.com/cube>.

■ 2-in-1 Fun

For generations, children have simply loved toy cars and toy dinosaurs. This hasn't changed, as one of the hottest gifts this holiday



season is VTech's Switch & Go Dinos, an interactive 2-in-1 play experience that brings together dinosaurs and vehicles. Switch & Go Dinos easily transform between a dinosaur and a vehicle in a few simple steps, coming equipped with an LCD screen for customizable animations. In dinosaur mode, action buttons play interesting facts about each dinosaur, so they can learn while they play.

For more information, visit <http://vtechkids.com/dinos>.

■ Board Games

Classic board games such as Monop-

oly and Risk have entertained families for decades. Why not introduce these classics to your children this year? New updates to these games are adding to the appeal for kids today. Monopoly Revolution has added sounds and music to accompany your real estate journey, while Risk Halo Wars incorporates armies from the popular video game franchise.

This holiday season, your old favorites are in style once again, with a new flavor. You'll be sure to see these gifts at the top of many wish lists. (StatePoint)

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Getting away for the holidays

Holiday travel can be rewarding on many levels, from the enjoyment of being with those you love in a great destination to the pleasure of letting someone else cook holiday meals and clean up after guests. Whether you're a single person looking to celebrate the holidays with friends, a family gathering members together from many states, or grandparents seeking a special time with the grand kids, a holiday vacation has a lot to offer.

One advantage can be cost. Many travel destinations that are typically thought of as summer vacation spots - like Myrtle Beach, S.C. - offer deals and incentives to travelers who visit during off seasons. When you travel between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day, you can often enjoy a holiday vacation for significantly less than you would pay to visit in high season.

Holiday travel is also an opportunity to escape the weather. While holiday carols extol the virtues of a white Christmas, many people would enjoy a respite from snow and



cold. Choose a destination in a region that's balmy all year long - like Myrtle Beach - and you can escape the worst of winter's chill.

Also look for a destination that offers shows, festivals and other celebrations to enhance your holiday enjoyment. In Myrtle Beach, for example, venues like the Alabama

Theatre, Carolina Opry and Pirates Voyage all stage holiday-themed live entertainment. You'll also find the Night of a Thousand Candles at Brookgreen Gardens, tree-lighting and a holiday parade at Broadway at the Beach, Christmas-themed dinner boat cruises, New Year's Eve celebrations and more.

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Gift ideas for your gamer this holiday season

With a few bits of good advice, you can easily find a gift for your gamer that will delight them. Keep in mind that gamers are always looking for ways to improve their playing experience.

Therefore, there's no such thing as a gamer who has everything. Here are a few ways to find the perfect gift for the video game-lover in your life.

*** Buy them new games based on fan-favorite classic brands.** Find a genre that features inherently fun and timelessly cool gameplay. This holiday season, you can find two new offerings from the TRANSFORMERS franchise for gamers of every age, allowing players to assume control of the famous transforming robots.

TRANSFORMERS: FALL OF CYBERTRON allows players to experience the most pivotal, post-apocalyptic battles of TRANSFORMERS lore that lead to their famed exodus from their home planet. Great for older teens and adults, the game is a cinematic and immersive action shooter available for PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 and PC. Great for younger fans, TRANSFORMERS PRIME is a family-friendly game based on the popu-



lar animated television series of the same name. This one lets players change form and power-up their favorite AUTOBOTS in diverse vistas around the world while cultivating friendships with Jack, Miko and Raf, the human characters from the show. This game is available on Nintendo's Wii U, Wii, 3DS and DS systems.

*** Think about accessories.** Gamers can never have enough accessories, from extra controllers to gamer-friendly computer keyboards to 3-D glasses for compatible systems. Do a little fishing for ideas by talking to your recipient (or his or her parents) and see if there's something special to add

to their gaming setup.

*** Find official apparel** from their favorite game titles or vintage video game T-shirts, which are sure to be a hit especially if your recipient is a bit older and has been a long-time gamer.

*** Buy a gift card** for your recipient's favorite game or electronics store. If you can't figure out what to buy, here's a surefire way to ensure your gamer gets what he or she wants.

*** Help your gamer enjoy their gaming experience in comfort.** Beanbags and other chairs that are designed for gaming will be a huge hit with your recipient. (BPT)



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