

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas! How can you tell? Christmas trees are popping up everywhere.



This year, why don't you invite the gang over for a Tree Trimming Party?! It's a great way to kick off the holiday season! An added bonus is that when guests attend your party they expect to find a house that's not quite ready for Christmas and you get a bunch of decorating help! Before your guests arrive, you should have purchased your tree and set it up in the stand. Light a fire in your fireplace and play Christmas music in the background. If you have a piano, place Christmas sheet music on it in case any of your guests feel inspired to play. Serve your food buffet-style, since this will be an active party with your guests moving around decorating and admiring your tree. The party can be held any time of day and you have many menu options. The simplest choice is to have plates of cookies and sweets with festive holiday drinks to accompany them. You can do this on a weekend afternoon from 2:00–5:00 p.m., or invite guests to come after dinner from 7:00-10:00 p.m. Indicate on your invitations that cookies and drinks will be served so that your guests don't arrive expecting more substantial food. My favorite party idea is to offer a cocktail buffet of hearty appetizers that can be served from 6:00-9:00 p.m. Or, to keep the mood very casual, arrange a large crockpot of chili on your buffet table, and serve it with sour cream, chopped onions, grated cheese, chopped cilantro, tortilla chips and salsa. Happy decorating! p.s. If you're looking for a little tree-trimming inspiration, please join Friends of Caroline Hospice at the Festival of Trees. Christmas trees may be viewed from Tuesday, December 8 through Saturday, December 12. I'll be there Tuesday through Friday serving lunch a la carte from 11:00 until 1:00 p.m. Bring a friend and join us!

Hot Buttered Rum

For the buttered-cream:

1 cup butter, softened

1 cup plus 2 tablespoons packed brown sugar

1 cup heavy whipping cream

2 cups powdered sugar

1/8 teaspoon ground cloves

1/8 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg

Have ready at serving time:

Rum

Boiling water

Ground nutmeg

Beat butter and brown sugar in a medium bowl with electric mixer until light and fluffy. Beat in whipping cream and powdered sugar alternately on low speed until smooth. Stir in cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg. Use immediately or freeze for up to 1 month. For each serving, place 2 tablespoons rum and 2 tablespoons buttered-cream in mugs. Stir in 1/2 cup boiling water. Sprinkle with nutmeg. Serves 24.

Appetizer Cheese Trees

3 (8 ounce) packages cream cheese, softened

4 cups shredded cheddar cheese (16 ounces)

2 tablespoons pesto

1 tablespoon grated onion

1/4 teaspoon dry mustard

3 drops hot pepper sauce

1/4 cup finely chopped parsley

1/4 cup toasted pine nuts

2 tablespoons chopped red bell pepper

1 large lemon

Assorted crackers

Mix cream cheese and cheddar cheese; divide in half. Mix pesto into 1 half; mix onion, mustard and pepper sauce into the other half. Cover each half and refrigerate about 4 hours or until firm enough to shape. Place cheese mixtures on cookie sheet. Shape each half into cone shape to look like Christmas trees. Roll trees in parsley, pressing evenly onto trees. Press pine nuts onto trees in string form for garland. Press bell pepper pieces onto trees for ornaments. Top each tree with star cut from lemon peel. Serve with crackers. Makes about 7 cups.

Hot Crab Dip

1 (8 ounce) package cream cheese, softened

1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese

1/4 cup mayonnaise

1/4 cup dry white wine

2 teaspoons sugar

1 teaspoon dry mustard

4 medium green onions, thinly sliced (1/4 cup)

1 clove garlic, finely chopped

1 (6 ounce) can crab meat, drained and flaked

1/3 cup sliced almonds, toasted

Assorted crackers and sliced raw vegetables

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Mix first 8 ingredients in a medium bowl until well blended. Stir in crab meat. Spread mixture in a lightly greased pie plate or shallow casserole dish. Bake, uncovered, for 15 minutes or until hot and bubbly. Sprinkle with almonds. Serve with crackers and crudite. Makes 2-1/2 cups.

Meatball Merriment

1 pound ground beef

1 medium onion, chopped (1/2 cup)

1 egg

1/3 cup dry bread crumbs

1/4 cup milk

1/4 teaspoon salt

1/8 teaspoon pepper

1 (12 ounce) jar salsa

2 medium green onions, thinly sliced

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Mix first 7 ingredients. Shape into thirty 1-inch balls. Place in a lightly greased 9x13x2-inch baking pan. Bake, uncovered, about 15 minutes or until no longer pink in center. Place salsa and meatballs in 2-quart saucepan. Heat to boiling, stirring occasionally; reduce heat. Cover and simmer about 15 minutes or until salsa and meatballs are hot. Sprinkle with green onions. Serve hot with wooden toothpicks. Makes 30 appetizers.

Savory Chicken Cheesecake

2 (8 ounce) packages cream cheese, softened

1 (8 ounce) container sour cream and onion dip

1 tablespoon all-purpose flour

1-1/2 teaspoons dried dill weed

3 eggs

1 cup finely chopped cooked chicken

1/2 cup whole berry cranberry sauce

2 tablespoons chopped walnuts, toasted

Assorted crackers

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease 8x3-inch springform pan. Beat cream cheese in large bowl with electric mixer on medium speed until fluffy. Beat in dip, flour and dill weed. Beat in eggs, one at a time. Fold in chicken. Spread evenly into prepared pan. Bake for 40 minutes or until edge is golden brown and center is firm. Cool 15 minutes. Run metal spatula along side of cheesecake to loosen. Remove side of pan. Cover tightly and chill for at least 4 hours. Spoon cranberry sauce onto center of cheesecake. Sprinkle with walnuts. To serve, cut into wedges. Serve with crackers. Serves 24.

Gorgonzola and Rosemary Cream Puffs

1/2 cup water

1/4 cup butter

1/2 cup all-purpose flour

1/4 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon dried rosemary leaves, crumbled

1/8 teaspoon coarsely ground black pepper

2 eggs

1 cup shredded Gorgonzola cheese (4 ounces)

2 tablespoons chopped pistachio nuts

Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Spray large cookie sheet with cooking spray. Heat water and butter to boiling in a 3-quart saucepan over medium heat. Add flour, salt, rosemary and pepper all at once; stir constantly 30 to 60 seconds or until mixture forms into a ball. Remove from heat. Add eggs, one at a time, beating with electric mixer on medium speed until mixture is well blended. Drop mixture by heaping tablespoons about 2 inches apart onto cookie sheet. Bake for 15 to 20 minutes or until golden brown. Cool 5 minutes. Gently press center of each puff with tip of spoon to make slight indentation. Sprinkle with cheese and nuts. Bake 2 to 4 minutes or until cheese is melted. Serve warm. Makes 25 appetizers.

Snowballs

1 cup butter, softened

1/2 cup powdered sugar

1 teaspoon vanilla

2-1/4 cups all-purpose flour

3/4 cup finely chopped pecans

Powdered sugar

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Beat butter, 1/2 cup powdered sugar and vanilla in a large bowl with electric mixer on medium speed, or with spoon. Stir in flour and nuts. Shape dough into 1-inch balls. Place about 2 inches apart on lightly greased cookie sheet. Bake 10 to 12 minutes or until set but not brown. Immediately remove from cookie sheet; roll in powdered sugar. Cool completely on wire rack. Roll in powdered sugar again. Makes about 4 dozen cookies.

Gingersnaps

1 cup packed brown sugar

3/4 cup shortening

1/4 cup molasses

1 egg

2-1/4 cups all-purpose flour

2 teaspoons baking soda

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1 teaspoon ground ginger

1/2 teaspoon ground cloves

1/4 teaspoon salt

Granulated sugar

Beat brown sugar, shortening, molasses and egg in large bowl with electric mixer on medium speed, or mix with spoon. Stir in flour, baking soda, cinnamon, ginger, cloves and salt. Cover and refrigerate for 1 hour. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease cookie sheet. Shape dough by rounded teaspoonfuls into balls; dip tops in granulated sugar. Place balls, sugared sides up, about 3 inches apart on cookie sheet. Bake 9 to 12 minutes or until just set. Remove from cookie sheet to wire rack; cool completely. Makes about 4 dozen cookies.

Peppermint Bark

1 (16 ounce) package almond bark, broken into pieces

24 hard peppermint candies

Cover cookie sheet with waxed paper, aluminum foil or parchment paper. Place almond bark in 2-quart microwavable casserole dish. Microwave, uncovered, for 2 to 3 minutes, stirring every 30 seconds, until almost melted. Stir until smooth. Place peppermint candies in a heavy plastic bag; crush with rolling pin or bottom of a heavy saucepan. Pour crushed candies into wire strainer. Shake strainer over melted almond bark until all of the tiniest candy pieces fall into the coating; reserve the large candy pieces. Stir almond bark to mix evenly. Spread peppermint bark evenly on cookie sheet. Sprinkle evenly with remaining candy pieces. Let stand for about

an hour or until cooled and hardened. Break into pieces. Makes about 16 candies.

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