

## Aunt Olivia's Kitchen

## Holiday sweets

by Lydia Lovell

Aunt Olivia prepared to make **Pecan Macaroons** by chopping very fine, almost to a paste, enough pecan nut meats to equal a cup. A blender or food processor can do the chore in minutes but it might have taken half-an-hour of chopping to satisfy Aunt Olivia. While she chopped, she and my mother, her oldest sister, visited together, mother's hands busy with her knitting needles.

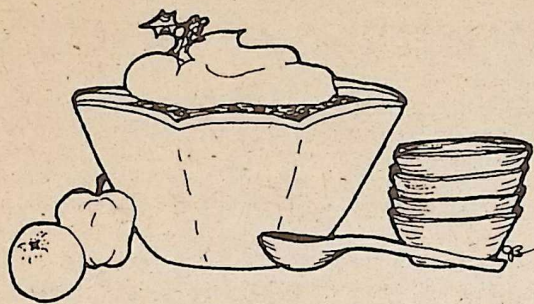
"Livvy," mother would say, "you're a glutton for punishment. Even if you are coming to our house for Christmas dinner, don't you have enough to do without all this extra work?"

With a smile at the older woman, my aunt would nod her head at the flying fingers and flashing needles as yarn passed in a constant stream from ball to fabric. "Now 'Cara, you know as well as I do that Christmas wouldn't seem like Christmas to me if I didn't do holiday baking. Anymore than it would for you, if you weren't knitting that bonnet to match the little sweater and the booties you finished last week for the baby. Making good things to eat is my **pleasure**, my way to celebrate, just as it's your way to knit mittens for the grandchildren, those endless scarves for the men, and the beautiful cabled vests you make for the girls. To each his own . . ."

Rising to her feet, Olivia rested a hand on my mother's shoulder for a moment as she took the wooden chopping bowl to the counter where the separated white of one egg waited to be beaten stiff. "Don't forget. You begin planning a year ahead, right after the new year, choosing patterns and finding the shades and weights of wool yarns you'll use to work with all year. Food, though, tends to be perishable, so I don't start cooking until I can count on wintry weather to provide extra cold storage space."

"I know, I know. Somehow it seems so frantic, that's all. You're mixing, stirring, whipping up this and beating up that, and doing it all during Christmas week. I'm puttering along with my needles for months on end and can do it sitting in an easy chair. But you're flying around."

Mother turned her work deftly, reversing as she began a new row. "I guess the worst thing for either one of us would be just sitting around with folded hands."



"Lord preserve us!" Aunt Olivia had sifted one cup of granulated sugar several times while her sister spoke. Now she took up the egg beater and, after a few minutes of clatter, the froth stood in stiff peaks.

Earlier in the day Aunt Olivia had completed the last of the final preparations for Christmas week and now had on hand an assortment of edibles any and all of which would shortly be converted to Christmas presents. Throughout the week that culminated in the holiday, people were coming and going on errands, to deliver packages, to carry friendly messages, and no one departed from the Lovells empty-handed after even the most casual visit.

Nor were Aunt Olivia's holiday specials limited to those who dropped in to see her. She baked and cooked certain delicacies, particularly chosen and particularly suitable to bring to the bedridden and housebound. In those long-gone days, there were no nursing homes, no homemaker services, no council for the aging or services for the elderly. When a person needed help, unless a family member came to the rescue, neighbors did the necessary.

And, in addition to remembering the aged and the ailing,

Aunt Olivia took enormous joy in sharing sweets with neighboring families of children.

To Gramma Howland who, even though cataracts had stolen her sight ten years before, still kept house and prepared her own meals, Aunt Olivia often brought a jar of her **Spice Apricots**.

1 28 oz. can whole apricots	7 whole cloves
¼ C. vinegar	1 cinnamon stick, one inch long
½ C. sugar	

Pour contents of can through a sieve, catching the syrup in a saucepan. Set aside the fruit and add remaining ingredients to syrup. Bring to a boil, add apricots and cook gently about 5 minutes. Pack into sterile jars; cover, cool and refrigerate. Gramma Howland enjoyed the fruit with baked chicken, sliced ham, or alongside a stuffed pork chop.

For the family whose seven children practically grew up "underfoot" at Aunt Olivia's and Uncle Henry's, much as my brother and I did, there was a Christmas tradition of a batch of **Chocolate Fudge**. The Lovells made the youngsters welcome not only because the property lines abutted in one rear corner, but also because the Lovells liked children.

24 ounces semisweet chocolate pieces	13 oz. can evaporated milk
1 C. butter or margarine	4½ C. sugar
7½ oz. jar marshmallow fluff	1 T. vanilla extract
	2 C. chopped walnuts

Stir together chocolate, margarine, and marshmallow fluff in a large bowl and set aside. Mix evaporated milk and sugar together in a large saucepan. Bring to a boil and cook, stirring constantly, exactly nine minutes. Pour milk/sugar mixture over contents of bowl and mix well. Beat with electric mixer only until blended. Stir in vanilla and nuts. Spread in greased 15" x 10" pan or in two 9" square pans. Refrigerate overnight. Cut in small squares. Pack in airtight containers and store in refrigerator.

Since the fudge recipe yields about five pounds of candy, there is often enough to share with more than one family of children. Sometimes Aunt Olivia made **popcorn balls**, too. These she wrapped in squares of red and green cellophane and tied with gold ribbon to create gifts pretty enough to hang on trees.

8 to 10 C. popped corn
2 C. shelled unsalted peanuts
1 C. honey

Pour popped corn and nuts into a big bowl. Simmer honey in a saucepan about 10 minutes over very low heat. Pour honey over popcorn and nuts, tossing quickly with two forks so honey will not drain to bottom of bowl. Continue tossing to coat well. When cool enough to handle, grease hands and press into balls of desired size. Dry on a sheet of foil; when completely cool seal in plastic wrap before tying in colored cellophane.

Uncle Henry's brother, Uncle Frank, and his wife, Aunt Sally, shared with everyone in my own family an appreciation for the tart deliciousness of Aunt Olivia's two-layer **Lemon Squares**.

**Bottom Layer:**  
2 C. flour  
3 T. brown sugar  
½ C. butter

Mix well together and pack into a greased pan.

**Top Layer:**  
3 eggs, beaten well  
2 C. brown sugar  
1 C. coconut, cut fine with scissors  
½ C. chopped walnuts  
½ C. seedless raisins  
Grated rind of two lemons

Mix thoroughly and spread atop bottom layer. Bake at 325° for 30 minutes.

Now Aunt Olivia was finishing the final preparations for **Pecan Macaroons**. To the stiffly beaten egg white she added, very gradually, sprinkling in one teaspoonful at a time while beating, the sugar and the chopped nut meats. On a well-oiled cookie sheet she dropped the mixture by teaspoonsful and then baked the macaroons ten minutes in a 400° oven. When they had cooled she removed them from the pan with a spatula and stored them in airtight tins.

"There, 'Cara, that's it for today. Now let's have a nice hot cup of tea. And try my Lemon Squares. You and Lydia both like them, I know." Then mother would fold her knitting and put it away while I set out the thin china cups and saucers and small silver spoons, and Aunt Olivia made the tea and let it steep while she cut and served lemon squares for afternoon tea.