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The Gift of Chocolate

Chocolate, loaded with charisma, is as seductive as a lover's pout. Biting into a sweet, velvety piece of dark chocolate is an experience that lingers. Your senses heighten with each bite as the chocolate slowly melts in your mouth.

It's no wonder chocolate is the gift of choice for many. It's a treat for all ages and occasions. This Valentine's Day, why not win your loved one's heart with something different?

Present them with a chocolate sampling test. It's like wine tasting but without the wine. Find out which chocolate your sweetheart likes best; let's say it's hazelnut cream. Then go to three different chocolatiers and buy that same chocolate from each store. On Valentine's Day, surprise them with three hazelnut creams to sample, and you won't need help from flying cupids shooting arrows of love.

Of course you can always win someone's heart with home baking. This year, make February 14th special by baking with bittersweet chocolate. It takes a little extra effort, but it's worth it. Most specialty chocolate stores sell blocks of bittersweet or semi-sweet chocolate. Go for the bittersweet chocolate. The rich chocolate taste is dynamite. Use this chocolate as a substitute for chocolate chips. Take a large chef's knife and chisel off pieces of chocolate. Use these dark morsels of fun in any recipe which calls for chocolate chips. Don't worry if they are not the same size - they melt. Your friends and lovers will be begging for seconds.

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by Barb Kemp

Here are two recipes to help make your Valentine's Day special.

Chocolate Valentine's Cake. Serves 8-10

- 1 1/3 cups all purpose flour
- 3/4 cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 3/4 cups sugar
- 1 cup buttermilk
- 1/2 cup orange juice
- 1/3 cup melted butter
- 2 large eggs, slightly beaten
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2/3 cup small bittersweet chocolate pieces or chocolate chips

Lightly grease an 8 inch square baking pan. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. In a medium sized bowl combine flour, cocoa powder, baking powder, baking soda, salt and sugar. In a large bowl combine buttermilk, orange juice, melted butter, eggs and vanilla extract. Add dry ingredients and mix until just combined. Spoon into prepared pan and cook for 40 minutes or until tester comes out clean. Remove from oven and immediately sprinkle on chocolate morsels or chocolate chips. Wait five minutes, and then spread melted chocolate evenly over cake.

Chocolate Sweetheart Cookies. Makes about 15 cookies

- 2/3 cup brown sugar
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar, plus 2 tablespoons
- 4 tablespoons butter
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 egg
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 2/3 cup cocoa
- 3/4 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup small bittersweet chocolate pieces or chocolate chips

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. In a large bowl beat butter, brown sugar and 1/2 cup sugar. Add egg, vanilla and beat with electric beaters until creamy. In a separate bowl, combine baking powder, baking soda, salt, cocoa, flour and chocolate pieces. Add to creamy mixture and mix with a spoon until all is combined (mixture will be quite stiff). Put 2 tablespoons sugar in a small bowl. Form cookie batter into one inch balls. Roll each ball into sugar to lightly coat. Place on a greased cookie sheet and flatten slightly. Bake 10-12 minutes.