It’s back…and that’s not good. I’m not referring to fruitcake, the target of many Christmas jokes, but to the technique of baking cakes and breads in canning jars. This is an old idea that reappears every few years, and this is one of those years. I’ve seen the idea featured in major magazines as Christmas gifts.

The cakes are cute, but food safety experts at North Carolina State University do not endorse this technique. With these cakes and breads, the batter is typically poured into a canning jar and baked in an oven. As soon as the cake/bread is done, it is removed from the oven while the steam is still exhausting from the jar, and the jar is immediately sealed to create a vacuum. Then the cake is stored without refrigeration, for sometimes over a year.

We tend to think of vacuumed-sealed foods as safe, but with cakes and breads, there is enough moisture present that harmful microorganisms can grow. This is especially true with cakes and breads containing added fruits. Thus, baking in a jar and storing the product on the shelf is not safe.

However, these cakes can be refrigerated. If you receive a cake in a jar, smile and store it in the fridge. Food poisoning is not a fun holiday visitor.

HOLIDAY SMARTESTS

- Though children get a kick out of opening individually wrapped presents, you can put all of an adult’s gifts in just 1 box without guilt.
- Think bulk when buying wrapping paper. You’ll get more mileage and less waste from large rolls of paper, PLUS you’ll be sending fewer cardboard tubes to the dump.
- Use fun shoelaces or hair ribbons to tie up gifts for the kids as these are reusable, not throw-aways as ribbon is. This year, I’m wrapping my niece’s gift with a muffler for the bow.
- Don’t waste when you wrap. Loop a piece of string around the box to measure how much paper you will need.
- Save and reuse to/from tags each year. After all, Billy is most likely to give Mom a gift every Christmas, so keep using the same tag. This is also a great way to “recycle” family history.

THINK GREEN FOR CHRISTMAS

Yes, green is a great color for Christmas decorating, but I’m thinking green as in protecting the environment. Consider these ideas when wrapping gifts to reduce the potential amount of waste and its toxicity.

HOLIDAY SMARTESTS

With the holidays come stains from ambrosia to zinfandel. For cleanup, keep a bottle of club soda on hand. It may not work on every stain, but it is a good general stain remover…and low cost.
PLASTICS AND CANCER

There has been a story circulating through E-mails and the media about dioxins in plastics causing cancer. The story warns people not to freeze plastic water bottles with water or to heat foods in the microwave in plastic containers as dioxins will be released from the plastic into the food or water.

Relax! According to Dr. Rolf Halden of the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, the story is an urban legend. In a recent interview, he stated that the principal source of dioxins is various combustion processes including natural events like wildfires.

So about those plastic water bottles – Dr. Rolf also says they do not even contain dioxins, plus freezing inhibits rather than encourages the release of chemicals. However, he added that there is another group of chemicals added to plastics to make them flexible and less brittle and these chemicals could interfere with bodily functions in humans. Heating plastics could increase the release of these chemicals into food and water.

Thus, Dr. Rolf recommends using heat-resistant glass or ceramics for microwave cooking, but you can freeze in plastic.

P.S. – Next week, there will probably be a new story circulating. A good place for reliable information is www.quackwatch.com.

TESTING A SLOW COOKER

Slow cookers are great for preparing meals on busy days, but like any other electrical device, they can get out of whack. (This may not be an engineer’s term, but you know what I mean.) So (especially if your slow cooker has been sitting on the shelf gathering dust) test it using these guidelines from the University of Minnesota’s Extension Service.

• Fill cooker 1/2 to 2/3 full of tap water (1-2 quarts).
• Heat on Low (200°F) for 8 hours with the lid on.
• Check the water temperature with an accurate food thermometer. Do this quickly, because the temperature drops 10-15 degrees when the lid is raised or removed.
• The temperature of the water should be 185°F. Temperatures below this would indicate the slow cooker does not heat food high enough or fast enough to avoid potential food safety problems; the cooker is unsafe and should be replaced.
• Temperatures 185°-200° indicate a food cooked 8 hours without stirring would be overdone.

HOLIDAY SMARTS

A bushel of apples weighs 42 pounds; the typical apple pie includes 2 pounds of apples. But what’s this mean in calories? A slice of apple pie (1/8 pie) has 280 calories. Before you banish apple pie from your holiday celebrations because of high calories, consider that a slice of pecan pie has 510 calories. To fight the holiday battle of the bulge, make smart choices; then you can have your pie and eat it too!

HAPPY HOLIDAYS … AND BEYOND

I wish you and yours a wonderful and safe holiday season. On January 31, 2008, I will be retiring after 33 years with Extension. I have enjoyed my years with Extension - especially here in Robeson. I hope to see many of you ‘round and about and to continue our friendship as I practice my “domestic arts” at home.

Susan Noble
Susan Noble
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