

Comfort food

ANYONE?

*Sister of St. Joseph Mary Drexler
offers inspiration from her kitchen
and her faith this holiday season*

BY MARY SOLBERG
PHOTOS BY RICK KLEIN

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**ith the holidays here, flour
is an essential ingredient to
bring cheer and comfort to
friends and family.**

Mixed with a little love and faith — along with lots of butter and sugar — flour has the power to transform even a pandemic-weary world.

In March, when quarantine guidelines first went into effect, shelf-stable milled grain was among the first items to go missing on grocery store shelves.

One had only to look on Facebook or other social media platforms to see the reason. People were baking and cooking up a storm and posting photos of their delectables online for all to see ... and, hopefully, eat.

2020 has been a year in which the hashtags #stressbaking and #quarantinebaking were commonplace in cyberspace. It all comes down to comfort; any reputable chef or baker will tell you that food can be a salve for what ails.

As Julia Child once said, "I think careful cooking is love, don't you?" And according to Ecclesiastes 9:7: "Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart."

Fastcompany.com recently pointed to a study in the *Journal of Palliative Medicine* that found that "culinary therapy" can be an effective tool in grief management."

Let's face it, most people have experienced some type of grief as the pandemic ripped away normal routines. This Christmas and New Year's may bring more challenges as we prepare to celebrate without the usual large parties and family meals.

"There's something about families coming together especially at Christmas, but it's hard right now with all of the health



Sister Mary Drexler's happy place over the holidays is the kitchen of her Millcreek Township home.

concerns,” says Sister Mary Drexler, SSJ, president of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Northwestern Pennsylvania.

She has the answer, of course: Food.

Known for her cooking and baking, especially around the holidays, Sister Mary, 75, typically packages up her favorite cookies and sweet rolls and delivers them to friends and family in Erie and in the Pittsburgh area.

She looks especially comfortable in the kitchen of her Millcreek Township home, where she kneads, stirs, sprinkles and bastes with the ease of Rachael Ray. She demurs the compliment, saying she simply loves to bake and cook. It’s a talent passed on to her by her parents, especially her mother, Clara, who fed a brood of seven children (all raised at Sacred Heart Parish in Erie).

“I feel I am nourished just by the making of bread or meals and I want to share that nourishment with other people,” says Sister Mary, who spent much of her religious life in education. (She served as principal for 10 years at Villa Maria Academy in Erie.)

In this era of social distancing, sharing food can be an effective way to stay connected, she explains.

“Just be there to give people a meal and wish them blessings,” she says. “For me, bread-making is spiritual. It’s like sharing in the Eucharist and how we are fed by a God who loves us. When I make bread and share it with others, I help to spread God’s love.”

Those who know Sister Mary — including neighbors, friends, family and fellow religious sisters — all clamor for her sweet rolls, adapted from a worn and food-stained 1987 copy of *Fleischmann’s Bake-it-easy Yeast Book*. Every year for the past 25 years, she has brought this glazed treat to her brother’s home in Pittsburgh, where his large family gathers for Christmas morning brunch.

She’s not sure if that Drexler family gathering will happen this year, but she’ll make the rolls anyway. In her kitchen, she is guided by the framed pencil sketch of a woman making bread. The image is called “Baker Woman God.”

“I love the symbolism. God is in us and working through us like yeast works in the dough,” she says. “I love the kneading and working the dough with my hands. I make sure I always use my hands. Sometimes when I knead, it helps me to process something I’m trying to figure out.”

In a year fraught with the difficulties of a historic public health crisis, flour might just be the answer.

Beginning here and on the next couple pages are some of
SISTER MARY DREXLER’S FAVORITE RECIPES
for cold weather and the holiday season.



Holiday red raspberry chocolate bars

- 2½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 1¼ cups finely chopped pecans
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1 cup (2 sticks) cold butter or margarine
- 1 jar (12 ounces) seedless red raspberry jam
- 1½ cups Hershey’s milk chocolate chips, semi-sweet chocolate chips or mini milk chocolates

1. Preheat oven to 350°. Grease 13”x9”x2” baking pan.

2. Stir together flour, sugar, pecans and eggs in large bowl. Cut in butter with pastry blender or fork until mixture resembles coarse crumbs; set aside 1½ cups of crumb mixture.

3. Press remaining crumb mixture on bottom of prepared pan. Stir jam to soften; carefully spread over crumb mixture in the pan. Sprinkle with chocolate chips. Crumble reserved crumb mixture evenly over top.

Bake 40 to 45 minutes or until lightly browned. Cool completely in pan on wire racks; cut into bars. (Makes 36 bars)

*** Recipe from The Hershey Company



Creating her much anticipated sweet rolls and pecan rolls, Sister Mary brushes butter on top for the finishing touch before baking.

Cinnamon sweet rolls

- 6 to 6½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1¼ cups sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 packages Rapid Rise active dry yeast
- 1 cup milk
- ¾ cup water
- ¼ cup (½ stick) margarine/butter
- 2 eggs, room temperature
- 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon

- 1.** In a large bowl, thoroughly mix 1¾ cups flour, ½ cup sugar, salt and undissolved yeast.
- 2.** Combine milk, water and ¼ cup butter or margarine in a saucepan. Heat over low heat until liquids are very warm (120-130° F). Margarine or butter does not need to melt.
- 3.** Gradually add to dry ingredients and beat 2 minutes at medium speed of electric mixer, scraping bowl occasionally. Add eggs and ½ cup flour. Beat at high speed 2 minutes, scraping bowl occasionally. Add enough flour to make a stiff dough.
- 4.** Turn out onto a lightly floured board; knead until smooth and elastic, about 8 to 10 minutes. Cover with plastic wrap and a towel. Let rest 20 minutes.
- 5.** Divide dough in half. Roll out each half into a 12"x18" rectangle. Brush lightly with butter. Combine ¾ cup remaining sugar and cinnamon. Sprinkle the cinnamon sugar over the dough.
- 6.** Beginning with the longer side, roll the dough. Pinch the sides so they stay together. Slice the roll into 2-inch rolls. Place on a greased baking dish. Brush with melted butter or margarine. Cover with plastic wrap. Refrigerate for 2 to 24 hours.
- 7.** When ready to bake, remove from refrigerator. Uncover dough. Let stand 10 minutes while oven is preheating. Bake at 375° F for about 30 minutes, or until done. Remove from pans and cool on wire racks.

***Adapted from Fleischmann's Bake-it-easy Yeast Book, 1987

TO MAKE PECAN STICKY BUNS

(using the above dough recipe):

Melt ½ cup margarine or butter. Stir in 1 cup firmly packed dark brown sugar and ½ cup light corn syrup until sugar is dissolved. Pour into two greased 9-inch square pans. Add pecan halves, spread out appropriately. Add rolls, brush with melted butter. Cover with plastic wrap and place in refrigerator for 2-24 hours. Bake at 375° F for 25 minutes or until done. Remove from oven and let rest 5 minutes before turning onto plate.

Glaze

- 1½ cups powdered sugar
- 2 tablespoons margarine or butter, softened
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 3-4 tablespoons milk or half-and-half

Mix together sugar, butter and vanilla. Gradually add milk until desired consistency.



Rice Krispy date balls

- 1 stick oleo (margarine)
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup dates, chopped
- 1 cup nuts, chopped
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 egg, well-beaten
- 1 tablespoon corn syrup
- 2 cups Rice Krispies
- 1 bag of coconut

In skillet, melt margarine, sugar. Add dates, nuts, corn syrup. Gradually add beaten egg. Then add vanilla and Rice Krispies. Form into 1 tablespoon balls and roll into a shallow bowl of coconut, making sure that the coconut covers the entire ball. To keep fresh longer, refrigerate cookies.

Note: Add the beaten egg slowly so it doesn't cook just the egg.



- 1 small stewing chicken, cut up
- 1 medium onion, sliced
- 1 stalk of celery, sliced
- 2 teaspoons salt
- ½ teaspoon thyme
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 3 tablespoons flour mixed with ⅓ cup of water

Put chicken, onion, celery, seasonings and enough water to cover in a large kettle or a Dutch oven. Bring to a boil. Cover. Reduce heat and simmer for 2½ to 3 hours or until chicken is tender. With slotted spoon, remove chicken. Cool enough to remove bones from meat. Skim fat from broth. Blend in flour mixture and stir over medium heat until slightly thickened. Add chicken meat. Bring to a boil. Drop in dumplings. Cover and simmer for 15 minutes. Serves 8.

Chicken stew

with carrot dumplings

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| Carrot Dumplings | 3 tablespoons shortening |
| 1 cup flour | ½ cup milk |
| 2 teaspoons baking powder | ¼ cup shredded carrot |
| ½ teaspoon salt | 1 teaspoon parsley flakes |

Sift together flour, baking powder and salt. Cut in shortening. Add in milk, carrot and parsley, stirring until flour is moist. Drop dumplings into liquid in 8 mounds.

*** From *Ideals Chicken and Poultry Cookbook*

