

RAISING THE BAR



Layers of flavors make bar cookies a go-to treat for Amy Wood. The Wichita cook is a national cooking contest finalist.

BY JOE STUMPE
The Wichita Eagle

Carry a plate of bar cookies into a room and watch heads turn. There's something reliably tempting about layers of chocolate, nuts, cream cheese and other ingredients in a rich, gooey, brownie-like treat. "I think they look a little fancier than just bringing cookies or a plain cake," said bar cookie fan Amy Wood, 31, of Wichita. "Because you can layer different flavors, people get excited about them."

Not long after leaving college, and early in her cooking career, Wood hit on bar cookies as an ideal contribution to bring to office events. After all, a pan of bar cookies travels well and feeds a crowd.

And it's a bar cookie recipe that made her one of 15 finalists in the national Betty Crocker "Bake Life Sweeter" contest. Wood could win \$5,000 and 1,000 box tops for her designated school. (See accompanying Peanut Butter Cookie Candy Bar recipe, other recipes and online voting info.)

As a finalist, she's already won \$500 and 1,000 box tops, which she gave to McLean Science/Tech Magnet Elementary School.

Despite her success in the Betty Crocker contest, Wood doesn't consider herself a master cook. In fact, the contest appealed to her

because it required participants to use a step-saving cookie or brownie mix in the recipe.

But Wood does enjoy "playing around" with recipes until she comes up with something that's her own.

"I might eat a piece of chocolate and then have a CornNut and say, 'Wow, chocolate and CornNut, that's interesting.' I try to think outside the box."

In the Betty Crocker contest, she came up with the bar cookie equivalent of a Snickers candy bar, including a nougat layer that she incorporated from another recipe.

Wood tries out her recipes on her husband, Robert, co-workers at the Sedgwick County Health Department and her parents' friends in the Wichita Area P.T. Cruisers Club.

Wood works for the health department's emergency management team, but plans to specialize in fighting childhood obesity after finishing her master's degree. An exercise enthusiast, the trim Wood sees nothing contradictory in her career goal and sweet tooth.

"I think everything can be eaten in moderation," she said. "You need to get in a physical activity and watch what you eat around" regular meals.

"Don't eat a pizza and then have this," she said of her bar cookie. "Yesterday, I ate a salad for dinner because I knew I had this."

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Photos by Mike Hutmacher/The Wichita Eagle

CHOCOLATE-PEANUT BUTTER CARAMEL BARS

This is a recipe from one of the first contests Amy Wood entered.

Cooking spray

BROWNIE LAYER:

1 pkg. Betty Crocker (1 lb., 3.8 oz.) fudge brownie mix

¼ cup water

½ cup vegetable oil

2 eggs

PEANUT BUTTER LAYER:

3 cups powdered sugar

1 cup creamy peanut butter

2 tablespoons butter or margarine, softened

¼ cup water

¾ cup salted peanuts, coarsely chopped

CARAMEL-CHOCOLATE LAYER:

1 bag (14 oz.) caramels, unwrapped

3 tablespoons water

1 bag (11.5 oz.) milk chocolate chips

Heat oven to 350 degrees. Spray bottom only of 13 x 9 inch pan with cooking spray.

Stir brownie mix, water, oil and eggs in medium bowl until well blended. Spread in pan. Bake 28-30 minutes or until toothpick inserted 2 inches from side of pan comes out clean. Cool completely, about 1 hour.

In a medium bowl, combine powdered sugar, peanut butter, butter and water; mix well (if necessary, add additional water 1 teaspoon at a time until mixture is smooth).

Drop spoonfuls of peanut butter mixture over cooled brownie layer; spread evenly. Sprinkle with

peanuts; refrigerate while making caramel layer.

Heat caramels and water in 1-quart saucepan over medium heat; stir frequently until caramels are melted. Pour caramel mixture over chopped peanuts; spread evenly. Refrigerate for 30 minutes or until caramel is set.

Melt milk chocolate chips in an uncovered microwavable bowl on medium-high (70 percent) for 1 minute. Stir. Microwave for 20 additional seconds as needed, then stir. Continue until melted and smooth. Once melted, pour evenly over caramel layer and gently spread. Refrigerate 1 hour or until chocolate is set before cutting. Makes 24 bars.

The Wichita Eagle—03/31/08



This dessert was a finalist in last year's Betty Crocker "Bake Life Sweeter" contest.

Cooking spray

1 pouch (1 lb. 1.5 oz.) oatmeal cookie mix

½ cup firm butter or margarine

2 pkgs. (8 oz. each) cream cheese, softened

½ cup sugar

2 tablespoons all-purpose flour

1 teaspoon vanilla

1 egg

1 can (21 oz.) apple pie filling

½ teaspoon ground cinnamon

¼ cup chopped walnuts

Heat oven to 350 degrees. Spray bottom and sides of 13x9-pan with cooking spray.

Place cookie mix in large bowl. With pastry blender or fork, cut in butter until mixture is crumbly and coarse. Reserve

1½ cups crumb mixture; press remaining crumbs in bottom of pan. Bake 10 minutes.

Meantime, in a large bowl, beat cream cheese, sugar, flour, vanilla and egg with electric mixer on medium speed until smooth.

Spread cream cheese mixture evenly over partially baked crust. In medium bowl, mix pie filling and cinnamon. Spoon evenly over cream cheese mixture.

Sprinkle reserved crumbs over top. Sprinkle with walnuts.

Bake 35 to 40 minutes longer or until light golden brown. Cool about 30 minutes. Refrigerate to chill, about 2 hours. For bars, cut into 6 rows by 4 rows. Store covered in refrigerator. Makes 24 bars.

The Wichita Eagle—03/31/08



PEANUT BUTTER COOKIE CANDY BARS

This is the recipe that has landed Amy Wood in the finals of the nationwide Betty Crocker "Bake Life Sweeter" contest.

Cooking spray

COOKIE DOUGH CRUST:

1 pouch (1 lb. 1.5 oz) Betty Crocker peanut butter cookie mix

1 tablespoon water

3 tablespoons vegetable oil

1 egg

NOUGAT LAYER:

1½ tablespoons water

½ cup light corn syrup

3 tablespoons butter

1¼ teaspoons vanilla extract

3 tablespoons peanut butter

Dash salt

3½ cups powdered sugar

CARAMEL LAYER:

1 bag (14 oz.) caramels, unwrapped

2 tablespoons water

1½ cups dry-roasted unsalted peanuts

TOPPING:

1 bag (11.5 oz.) milk chocolate chips

Heat oven to 350 degrees. Spray bottom of 13x9-inch pan with cooking spray. Make cookie dough as directed on pouch, adding water, vegetable oil and egg.

Press dough into pan. Bake 12 to 15 minutes or until edges are light golden brown. Cool to touch.

In large bowl, beat 1½ tablespoons water, corn syrup, butter, vanilla, peanut butter and salt with electric mixer on medium speed until creamy. Slowly add powdered sugar. When nougat is the consistency of dough, press evenly over cookie crust. Set pan in refrigerator.

Melt caramels in a small saucepan with 2 tablespoons water over low heat. Once melted, stir in peanuts. Pour the mixture evenly over the nougat layer. Cool in the refrigerator, about 15 minutes.

When the caramel mixture is firm, melt milk chocolate chips in an uncovered small microwavable bowl on medium-high (70 percent) for 1 minute. Stir. Microwave for 20 additional seconds as needed, then stir. Continue until melted and smooth. Once melted, pour evenly over caramel layer. Cool completely until chocolate is set (bars can be refrigerated to speed up the cooling process). Cut into bars. Store covered at room temperature.

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HOW TO VOTE

The online favorite in the Betty Crocker "Bake Life Sweeter" contest wins \$500. To check out the recipes, go to bettycrocker.com. (You'll need to register with the site to vote.)

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