



Hot drink mixes to warm your holiday season

Get your holiday party off to a warm start with spiced cider, hot buttered rums, a cup of hot mocha, or wassail.

What's wassail? It's that stuff they drank in merrie olde England when they ate, drank, and made merry: a warm drink of fruit or wine, flavored with spices and used at festive occasions!

Well, the merry-making season (not to mention the sledding season) is here, and with an "instant mix" and your microwave, you can serve wassail or one of these other warmer-uppers, at a moment's notice. These drinks make a nice change from coffee and coffee. So let the festivities begin!

By the way, any of these mixes stored in a decorative tin or jar, would make a nice last minute gift for someone. Be sure to include serving directions!

Wassail Mix

- 6 whole cloves
- 2 sticks cinnamon or 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 2 whole allspice or 1 teaspoon ground allspice
- 1 teaspoon ginger
- 1/2 teaspoon nutmeg
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 cups water

1. Combine the spices in a drip coffee filter or piece of folded

cheesecloth, and tie closed with a piece of string or dental floss. Put the water and sugar in a 4-cup measure, and add the spice packet.

2. Cook on high for 6-8 minutes until boiling and the sugar dissolves. Reduce power and cook on medium (50, 5) for 10 minutes.

3. Set aside to stand for 1 hour for the flavor to develop. Remove spices*, store syrup in a closed container in the refrigerator.

4. To serve 4 to 5 people, add 3/4 cup wassail mix to 3 cups of juice and heat in a glass heatproof pitcher or bowl. Heat on high for 8-10 minutes (or set temperature probe for 170-175 degrees). Serve with a slice of fresh fruit, or a cinnamon stick as a stirrer.

5. For individual servings, put 2-3 tablespoons mix in a cup or mug and fill with juice. Heat on high for 2 to 2 1/2 minutes per serving. (For other quantities, use 1/4 cup mix per cup of juice, and adjust heating time as needed.)

The following juice combinations are good: apple or cranapple; 2 cups apple with 1 cup orange; 2 cups cranberry with 1 cup pineapple; 2 cups orange with 1 cup cranberry. Or add the mix to 3 cups cider for hot spiced cider. One third cup rum may be added to three cups juice if desired. Makes 2 cups mix.

*Save the spice packet in the refrigerator and boil it for a few minutes in a cup of water whenever you want a warm spicy aroma in the house.

Hot Buttered Rum (or Cider!) Mix

- 1 stick butter or margarine
- 2 cups packed brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon ground cloves
- 1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- Cinnamon sticks for stirrers, optional

1. Melt butter in a microsafe bowl, (use high for 45-60 seconds). Thoroughly stir in remaining ingredients. Store in a closed container in the refrigerator.

2. To serve Hot Buttered Rum: Put 1 tablespoon in a cup or mug. Add 6-8 ounces boiling water and 1 ounce rum. Stir with a cinnamon stick for added flavor.

3. To serve Hot Buttered Cider: Put 6-8 ounces cider or apple juice in a mug and heat for 2-3 minutes. Stir in 1 tablespoon mix. Makes about 24 servings.

Mocha Mix

- 1/2 cup unsweetened cocoa
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 cups nonfat dry milk powder
- 1/2 cup instant coffee powder*
- 1 1/2 teaspoons dried orange peel

1. Mix all ingredients together well in a bowl. (Sift the ingredients together if possible. This breaks the milk powder into smaller granules so it dissolves more easily.)

2. Store in an airtight container; this does not need refrigeration.

3. To serve: Put about 3 tablespoons mix in a mug. Add 1/4 cup boiling water, stirring hard to dissolve mix. Then add 1/2 cup more water, stir and serve immediately. Makes 3 cups mix.

*Use decaffeinated instant coffee for a soothing bedtime drink.

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Think practical when selecting toys

COLLEGE PARK, Md. — Two facts to remember this Christmas: toys are important to children and money is important to adults. Keep these thoughts in mind as you check your junior's Santa-request list. Choosing toys correctly could benefit your child's development and save you money.

"Children learn by doing, therefore toys are very important in their development and growth," says Cheryl H. Jones, Baltimore City extension home economist. Before buying any toy for your child, Jones says it is important to consider the following:

— Always select toys that interest your child and are at his or her level of development. You want to avoid frustrating your child during his play time.

— Select toys which encourage creativity.

— Select toys that your child can become actively involved with. Avoid "spectator" toys.

— Select toys that are durable enough to take the abuse of a child.

— Select a toy that can be shared easily with other children.

Jones warns against relying on the recommended age range on toy packages. "The major manufacturers set the ranges after conducting careful research with children in nursery schools, day-care centers and in test homes," says Jones. Experts caution parents against overestimating a child's development; however parents who participate in their child's play activities are best equipped to match toys to the functional level of their child's interests, abilities and age.

Rather than overwhelm your

child with too many toys, Jones suggests introducing a few new ones (or old ones that were put away after your child lost interest in them) at various times to continually encourage a child's play experiences. This is known as balanced play, which simply means having various kinds of toys to play with — not a lot of toys, but toys that cover a wide range of activities. According to Jones, the types of play activity a child should engage in are:

— Active Physical Play - helps develop a healthy, strong body. Example: push/pull toys, balls, sport and gymnasium equipment.

— Manipulative, Constructive, Creative, and Scientific Play — gives the child the opportunity for expressing ideas, stimulating observation, and developing resourcefulness. Some examples of these toys would be building blocks, painting and drawing materials, and construction toys.

— Imitative, Imaginative, and Dramatic Play — encourages creative expression and helps the child understand the world around him. The child can imitate and dramatize adult activities. Examples of useful toys include dolls, stuffed animals, costumes, trucks, cars, etc.

— Social Play — helps children learn how to get along with each other, gives training in good sportsmanship, and teaches the value of concentrating and thinking quickly and accurately.

These points can be most helpful this Christmas by preventing Santa or parents from bringing home frivolous toys which could soon be put aside and forgotten.

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