

Cooking Corner: Explore your creative side with popcorn flavorings

by Caroline Dipping

For party munchies or holiday giftees, a batch of homemade popcorn all gussied up in caramel or herbs or cheese could not be easier or less expensive to make. And few people would turn up their noses at such an offering.

POP ART - It's super easy to whip up a batch of Maple-Pumpkin Spice Popcorn for a holiday gift. CNS Photo courtesy of The Popcorn Board. CHILI-LIME POPCORN - Flavored popcorn doesn't have to be sweet. Savory flavorings such as lime and chili powder also work well. CNS Photo courtesy of The Popcorn Board. The trick to making flavored popcorn a howling success, however, is to pop a batch from scratch. None of this microwaveable stuff.

"It's so easy and more economical. I just don't think it's that big of a deal to pop up a batch," said Wendy Boersma Rappel, spokeswoman for The Popcorn Board, a nonprofit group funded by U.S. popcorn processors to raise awareness of popcorn as a versatile, whole-grain snack.

"People get hung up on, 'I've got to dirty a pan.' It's just a little pan... a soapy rinse and it's good."

Popping up a tried-and-true batch (which costs about 20 cents, according to Boersma Rappel) requires nothing more than heat, a pan with a lid, a bit of oil and some kernels.

Simply pour enough oil - 1/4 to 1/3 cup - to lightly coat the bottom of a pan. Add a couple of kernels to the pan, cover and heat on the stove top. When those test kernels pop, open the lid, pour in enough kernels to cover the bottom of the pan in a single layer, put the lid back on, give the pan a few shakes periodically, and wait for the explosions.

Occasionally, crack the lid slightly to let steam escape. The whole process takes about 4 to 5 minutes.

"It's a wonderful method," said Boersma Rappel. "And it connects you back with the food again, which is always an important thing."

Of the four types of corn - field or dent; sweet; flint or Indian; and popcorn - only popcorn is capable of transforming itself from hard kernel to popped goodness.

Popcorn comes in two basic varieties - mushroom, which has sturdy, more circular kernels, and snowflake, which looks like its name suggests. Mushroom popcorn is most often used commercially for making confections such as caramel corn. Snowflake popcorn is what consumers are more familiar with from the supermarket shelves.

Once you have your canvas of popped corn - at a mere 31 calories per cup if air popped, 55 calories if oil popped - the pop-abilities are limitless. (Tip: Flavorings adhere better to oil-popped corn than to air-popped.)

"The great thing about popcorn is that it can take on any number of flavors depending on your own imagination or hankering that day," said Boersma Rappel. "It can take on herbs, sweet flavors, savory flavors. You can make popcorn very low-fat and low-calorie and delicious, or you can make it nice and high-fat, if that's what you're in the mood for."

Ethnic flavoring possibilities such as hot wasabi, sweet garam masala, even spicy Italian, illustrate popcorn's versatility. Boersma Rappel professes a love for Peanut Butter Cups, a melange of popcorn, raisins, mini marshmallows, shredded wheat and roasted peanuts glued together with peanut butter. (Look for this recipe and more at www.popcorn.org.)

If you plan to give popcorn as a gift, Boersma Rappel suggests putting the popcorn in an airtight container and making sure the recipient is going to be able to eat it within two or three days.

"Popcorn is not something to give if it won't be eaten for two weeks," she said. "It has a short window of opportunity. It loses that magical crunch and oomph within a small period."

While The Popcorn Board does not track popularity of flavors, Boersma Rappel says the most popular has to be "the trifecta, the trinity - plain, cheddar and caramel."

She has the enviable assignment of coming up with ideas for new flavors, then letting a recipe developer transform those ideas into crunchable reality.

Still, when it comes to what she likes to whip up for herself at least a couple times a week, she says with a laugh, "Even though we have dozens of recipes, I just add a little salt to mine every time. It's always delicious."

MACADAMIA-BUTTER CRUNCH POPCORN

12 cups popped popcorn

3 cups whole macadamia nuts

1 cup brown sugar

1/2 cup butter

1/4 cup light corn syrup

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 teaspoon baking soda

Yield 4 to 6 servings.

Preheat oven to 200 F. Divide popcorn and nuts between 2 ungreased 13x9-inch rectangular pans. Make sure popcorn and nuts are evenly mixed.

In medium saucepan, cook brown sugar, butter, corn syrup and salt over medium heat, stirring constantly until bubbly around edges. Continue cooking for 5 more minutes, and then remove pan from heat. Stir in baking soda until foamy. Pour mixture over popcorn and nuts, stirring until corn is well coated. Bake, uncovered, for 1 hour, stirring every 15 minutes.

- Popcorn Palace

CHILI-LIME POPCORN

1 quart popped popcorn

1 teaspoon brewer's yeast powder or nutritional yeast (see note)

1 teaspoon lime juice

1/2 teaspoon chili powder

1/4 teaspoon salt

Yields 1 quart.

Preheat oven to 300 F. Spread popcorn on baking sheet. Sprinkle yeast powder, lime juice, chili powder and salt over popcorn. Heat about 7 minutes and toss just before serving.

Note: Brewer's yeast or nutritional yeast adds a cheese-like flavor without the calories or fat of cheese. It is sold in health food stores.

MAPLE-PUMPKIN SPICE POPCORN

2 tablespoons brown sugar

2 tablespoons maple syrup

1 1/2 teaspoons pumpkin pie spice

1 tablespoon butter or margarine

1/2 cup chopped pecans, optional

5 cups popped popcorn

Yields 5 cups.

In large saucepan or pot, heat brown sugar, maple syrup and pumpkin pie spice mix over medium heat. Cook, stirring, 3 minutes, or until sugar is dissolved and mixture is bubbling. Stir in butter until melted and well blended. Add pecans, if desired, and popcorn, and stir until well coated.

Allow mixture to cool before serving. Serve immediately or store in airtight container.

PEANUT BUTTER POPCORN BALLS

1/2 cup sugar

1/2 cup light corn syrup

3 tablespoons butter or margarine

3 tablespoons peanut butter

8 cups popped popcorn

1 cup candy-coated peanut candy (Reese's Pieces)

Yields 14 to 18 balls.

Line baking sheet or work surface with wax paper; set aside. Stir sugar, corn syrup, butter and peanut butter together in large saucepan. Bring to a full boil over medium heat. Stir in popcorn until well coated. Remove pan from heat and stir candy pieces gently into mixture. Allow mixture to cool just enough to allow handling.

Using an ice cream scoop or buttered hands, shape mixture into 2-inch balls and place on wax paper to cool. Wrap each ball in plastic wrap and store in an airtight container.

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