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November 22, 2006

Perfect gifts for your favorite cook

Ladies and gentlemen, start your engines! Friday is the biggest shopping day of the year. Millions of us will heat our credit cards to the melting point while we get a jump on our holiday gift giving. And most of us won't have a clue about what to buy.

Well, everyone knows I'll give my opinion whenever I'm asked — and often when I'm not. So here are some affordable gift ideas for anyone who likes to cook or eat:

Olive Oil

My business associate Brenna Bolger gave me a book called "The Passionate Olive," written by Carol Firenze. It's a compilation of "101 things to do with olive oil." The book opens with some education about olive oil history, manufacturing, grades, flavors, tasting and certifications. Then it goes into the ways to use it.

Chapters include using it around the house, for health, for beauty, for pregnancy and baby care, for pets, for — uh — sensuality, and of course for cooking. Some uses include keeping wax from sticking in a candle holder, polishing mahogany furniture, softening chapped skin, treating constipation, preventing cats' hairballs, burning it in oil lamps, bringing luster back to pearls, fixing squeaky hinges, and a lot more.

Plenty of concoctions are included. For example, a few drops of olive oil and a bit of lemon juice mixed into warm water can be mopped on hardwood or slate floors to restore the shine.

And of course, there are the recipes such as bruschetta, tuna confit, romesco sauce, salsa verde, and much more. I'd couple the book with a bottle of Spanish olive oil from Jones & Bones gourmet shop in Capitola. Ask Jennifer Jones to help make your selection. She's got the topic covered. Then cross the street to Gayle's Bakery and add a loaf of their wonderful olive or francese bread.

Bakeware And Pottery

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I love the hand-painted European pottery suitable for oven use. The most popular today is from Poland — rich, lacy designs that add some dazzle to the table. Italy also provides pottery with rustic scenes, agricultural themes and Renaissance designs. You'll find casserole dishes, soup tureens, platters and more. Look into several local stores, including

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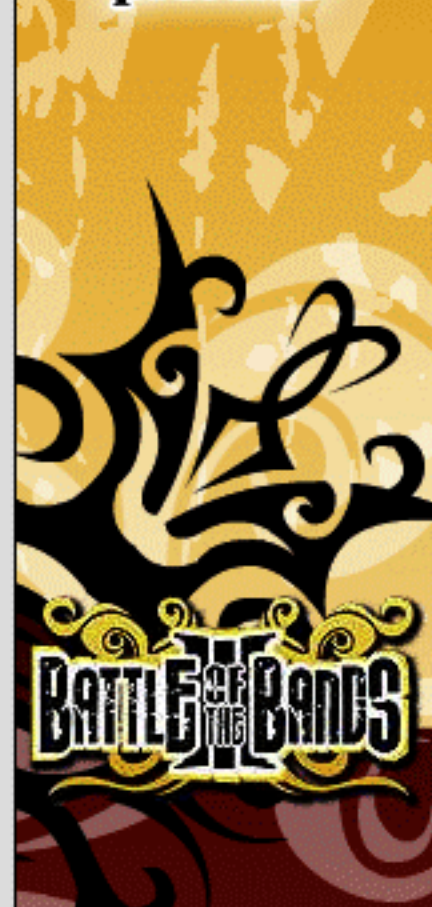
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Chefworks in downtown Santa Cruz.

Last year, my friend Nancy Redfield gave me a totally practical Pyrex baking dish that came with a snap-on cover and an insulated carrying case with handles. Now when I go to parties or picnics, I can take lasagnas or casseroles right out of the oven, pack them up, and have them arrive hot and steamy. And no worries about the contents slopping around in the car as I negotiate the freeway.

Don't overlook those cute mini-muffin pans. I use mine to make bite-size brownies, jam-filled tarts and tiny quiche. Also check out the pans for baking individual bundt cakes. Some are amazingly detailed with almost architectural elements.

Gadgets To The Max

Those digital instant-read thermometers have dropped in price, so no need to take out a second mortgage anymore. I use mine for making candy, checking the holding temperature for buffet foods, measuring the temperature for dough, and I'll certainly use it on my turkey on Thursday.

OXO Good Grips are the best things going. These cushioned, ergonomic gadgets are easy to hold, even if you don't have arthritis. They include everything from vegetable peelers to can openers. Put a collection of them into a pretty cloth bag, perhaps with several clever refrigerator magnets.

Silpat makes silicone baking mats to fit cookie sheets. Drop on the dough, bake, and the cookies slide right off. There's no chance of sticking or burning. Other silicone ware includes oven mitts, baking pans, hot pads and potholders. The mitts are really great when you have to pull foods from boiling water, such as lobster or corn on the cob.

For The Kids

Get the young ones started in the kitchen now. They love the magic of it all, and it's how my own kids became terrific home cooks. Don't go just for the kid-themed stuff. My grandson's cousin, Elijah Tyra, was thrilled to receive a Mario Battalli cookbook for his 9th birthday this year.

Think in terms of those cast-iron pans that make cornbread in the shape of saguaro cactus, fish or other designs. Look for a good-quality apron and embroider the kid's name on it — maybe with the title 'Executive Chef.' Sign them up for kid cooking lessons at Fresh Prep Kitchens downtown www.freshprep.com, and you may come home from work to find dinner already on the table.

Contact Donna Maurillo at P.O. Box 638, Santa Cruz, CA 95061; fax to 429-9620; or e-mail to sentinelfood@aol.com.

Tip Of

the week

Before eating an orange, zest it. Then put the shavings into a zippered plastic bag and store in the freezer for future use.

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the week

Instead of canned tuna, try this version from "The Passionate Olive."

TUNA CONFIT

3 lb. fresh albacore or tombo tuna loin

5 sprigs marjoram

1 sprig rosemary

2 tsps. cracked black pepper

3 Tbsps. salt

4-5 crushed garlic cloves

1 lemon, sliced

1 cup dry white wine

Extra virgin olive oil to cover

Cut the tuna into 1-pound pieces. Place the marjoram, rosemary, pepper, garlic, and lemon on a cutting board. Chop just enough to bruise the herbs and evenly distribute the salt and pepper. Rub the tuna with the mixture and place in a non-reactive pan or dish (such as glass, stainless steel or anodized aluminum). Cover with the remaining herb and salt mixture. Let stand for two hours in the refrigerator.

Add the wine and cover with olive oil. The tuna can be cooked in this mixture in two ways, or you can use a combination of both — in a frying pan on the stove at low heat for 20 minutes, or in the oven at 350 degrees for one hour. Cool. Store in an airtight food-safe container in the refrigerator, covered with the oil. Keeps for up to 4 days.

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