



Chocolate. Cool Kitchen Tools. Beautiful Beans. Cookies, Cakes and More...

ruthreichl.substack.com/p/chocolate-cool-kitchen-tools-beautiful

Ruth Reichl | December 5, 2025

It's that time of year... so I thought I would begin with one of my favorite gifts. Show up with a box of [Littlejohn's Toffee](#) and you will always be welcome.

OUT & ABOUT

THE ONLY CANDY I EVER LOVED

How did our expert develop a sweet tooth? All it took was a bite of toffee.

By Ruth Reichl

Tam not a candy person. Given the choice, I'll take savory over sweet every time. So when three different people showed up bearing boxes of Littlejohn's English Toffee during a recent trip I took to Los Angeles, I was far from amused. "What is it with these Angelinos and their candy?" I asked my husband. "Couldn't somebody just go buy us a nice bottle of wine?" But as the boxes piled up, I realized I had to at least try it. I took a bite, and it crackled into my mouth with a rush of caramel sweetness. Right behind that came the rich shock of chocolate, followed by a flutter of nuts. Intoxicated by the taste, I took another bite, and then another. It had such a seductive snap that I found myself reaching for more until half a box had vanished.

For nearly 100 years, Los Angeles has been enchanted by this homegrown candy, and the reasons are easy to understand. When Mr. and Mrs. Littlejohn (her first name was Mary, his is lost to history) began crafting their confections, L.A. was orange groves and movies were silent. Angelinos watched the Littlejohns cook up their toffee in tiny batches in copper kettles and temper it on marble tables, and they proudly adopted it as their own. Before long it had become the city's preferred hostess gift.

But the candy, like so many things in Los Angeles, is not what it seems. It's not English, and it's not toffee. And while I'm sorry to break this to my West Coast friends, this candy, like so many other Tinseltown denizens, is actually a native New Yorker.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first documented appearance of the word *toffee* was in 1825, right around the time British plantations in the Caribbean began turning out enough sugar that it became an affordable

CANDY CRUSH
Ruth Reichl doesn't usually care for sweets. An exception is Littlejohn's English Toffee. \$19.95 per pound. LITTLEJOHNSCANDY.COM

commodity. English toffee was plain; it was made of butter and sugar, and occasionally rum.

An English immigrant arrived in New York in the late 1850s determined to change the recipe. When William Loft set up shop in 1860, he took the familiar confection, wrapped it in a soft chocolate robe, and rolled it in crushed almonds.

Then he gave his American creation a new name: *buttercrunch*. Loft's candy was wildly successful. By 1919, when his company opened a huge factory in Long Island City, it had become the largest candy manufacturer in the world. In fact, when the Pepsi-Cola Company went bankrupt in 1931, it was Loft who acquired it.

Meanwhile, out in California, the Littlejohns were doing things differently. They not only insisted on calling their *buttercrunch* English Toffee, they were determined to stay small. To this day you can go to the farmers market and watch your toffee—and Littlejohn's other offerings, like chocolate-dipped orange slices—being made.

It is one of the ironies of history that the creator of the original *buttercrunch* is no more; the last outpost of the Loft Candy Company closed in the early 1990s. Meanwhile, the Littlejohns' company, with its small-is-beautiful philosophy, soldiers on in its tiny space.

Well, mostly. Littlejohn—now owned by Michael Graves, who started working in the shop as a teenager—recently opened a San Francisco outpost, and this worries me. I don't want it to go the way of Loft's enterprise. Now that I've discovered my taste for candy, it's very hard to imagine a world without it. ❧

IF YOU HATE THIS
Butterfinger

TRY THIS:

- **Dried apricots** These intense whole fruits—minus the pits—are a favorite. APRICOTJUNK.COM
- **Salty licorice** Dark, chewy, and more savory than sweet. A delight for licorice lovers. HOBBSHONK.COM
- **Torrone** Soft, creamy, and filled with bright green pistachios, this Sicilian nougat will make any nut lover happy. GUSTABO.COM

SUMMER 2019 THE GO TOWARDSCOURTINMAD.COM

And now, for a few more gifts....



The Best Way to Open a Wine Bottle

This is my favorite wine opener.

I bought it for \$2 at a thrift shop in Berkeley in 1974 and I've used it almost every day since. It has no bells and no whistles: it just works. And it wasn't even designed to open wine. It's an antique beer opener.

If you're looking for a really thoughtful gift for someone who likes wine (or artisanal beer brews topped with corks), you could not do better than a vintage beer corkscrew. You can

find them in many antique stores, rummage shops and the like. And there are dozens of online sources at wildly varying prices. Try [this one](#) - or [this one](#).

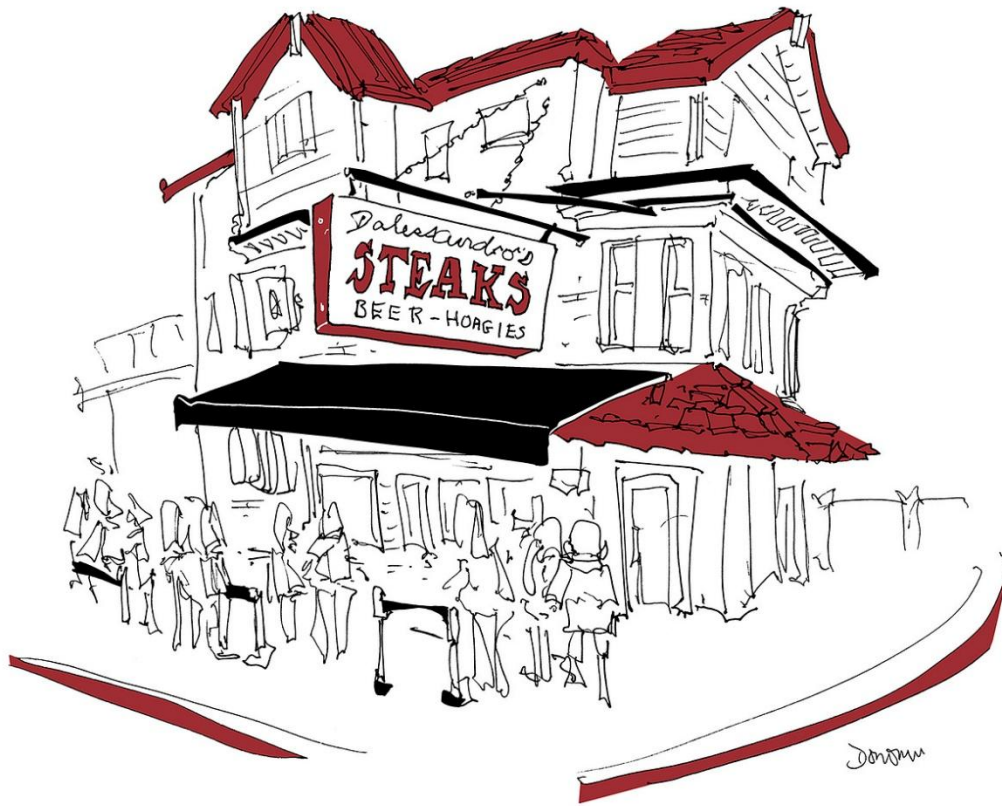


While we're on the subject of wine openers - my [Chefman Electric Wine Opener](#) is still going strong after six years of vigorous use. I have a hard time believing that something I got for less than \$20 could last so long.



Cool Tools

If you're looking for the perfect gift for someone who's just setting up a kitchen, you could not do better than this [entire set of tools from Hedley & Bennett](#). The company, a longtime supplier of aprons to chefs, has branched out with these thoughtfully designed and tested utensils. One by one I find myself shedding my old tools in favor of these... Should you be considering something for yourself, you might want to think about the silicon ladle which I am constantly reaching for; the tapered lip prevents dribbling and the unusual shape means it can get to the very bottom of a pot.



The artist and former New Yorker editor John Donohue has become our national chronicler of restaurants; this year he's added [Philadelphia](#) to the list. (Other cities include New York, Paris, London, Chicago, Napa Valley, DC and Block Island.) If you know a restaurant-lover, these hand-drawn prints make thoughtful, personal (and affordable) gifts.



Kitchen Sculpture

You know how annoying it is when a cookbook won't stay open while you're cooking? I've fallen in love with this beautiful [almond bookweight](#), a quiet piece of sculpture that looks lovely even when it's not busy in the kitchen.



Salt and Peppa

It's easy to find lovely salt shakers for your table, but finding a pepper grinder small enough to sit sedately on your table is not easy. That's one reason I'm so happy to have found this [Hexmill Tabletop Salt and Pepper](#) set. They're easy to fill, easy to use (they turn so smoothly), and best of all, the grind is incredibly even.



Elusive Olive Oil

If you've ever tasted *olio nuovo* - just-pressed olive oil - you know how delightful the flavor is. You also know that the bright new flavor doesn't last very long. Oil ages quickly, and while you are left with excellent oil it has lost that just-pressed flavor.

One of the wonderful things about the nascent American olive oil industry is that we now have access to new oil in our own country. If you know an olive oil addict - and aren't we

all? - a bottle of *olio nuevo* is the perfect present. You can pre-order the [Goldridge Olio Nuovo](#) (it will probably be pressed and shipped in the next week or so). And while you're on the site, take a look at their apple products; they make a very fine apple cider syrup.



Beautiful Beans

If you've been to the state of Michoacan you know how much they prize [Flor de Junio beans](#) with their beautiful pink swirls. But here's the thing: outside of Mexico the beans are hard to find - and they have a short shelf life. The Rancho Gordo people have them right now, and I can't think of a more thoughtful gift for a bean-lover.

I should note that the photograph above does not do them justice. Here is the poetic description on the Rancho Gordo site: "*The bean itself stays whole but you bite into and it seems to melt in your mouth with creamy bean goodness. And yet it's as light as the wings of a migrating Monarch butterfly! (They go down to Michoacan, you know.)*"



While you're at it, you might throw in this rather [spectacular *cucharamero* from the state of Michoacan](#).



Very Rare Jam

Oishii, as any devotee of [Midnight Diner](#) can tell you, means delicious. These intriguing [Oishii jams](#) really are. Made from the super-expensive Japanese Koyo variety of strawberries they have a flavor profile unlike any jam you've ever tasted.

The Strawberry Yuzu preserves have a strong strawberry flavor with a touch of sweetness and a sharp citric brightness. The strawberry spread, which is combined with bean paste, is denser and truly intriguing. I found myself stirring it into cranberry sauce at Thanksgiving, and I'm always coming up with new ways to use it.

They're expensive and beautifully packaged - which is what makes them such great gifts.





A Life Saver

Three years ago I mentioned a new product that intrigued me: [Mill](#), a recycling machine for your kitchen. At the time I hadn't yet bought one.

Since then Stanley (every Mill-owner I know has given theirs a name), has changed my life. Solved my bear problem. Cut my garbage down to almost nothing. And made me feel that I'm helping the environment.

The Mill is a serious piece of equipment and it is expensive. But I just bought my son one for Christmas and if you have someone you really love on your list, you might consider sending them a Mill.



The Perfect Date

The Bautista family raise what they call their “seven hot dates” organically in Mecca California. The [dates](#) each have their own personality, but all of them are sweet, rich, meaty and filled with flavor. And since dates are having a moment right now, they make a particularly welcome gift. You might throw in a printout of this fantastic recipe for [chicken with dates, citrus and harissa](#).

La Briffe is a reader-supported publication. To receive new posts and support my work, consider becoming a free or paid subscriber.



Favorite Seasonal Treats

I've written about all of these before, but since it's that time of year, I thought I'd remind you about my favorite holiday confections.

Light as Air

Roy Shvartzapel is, by his own admission, crazily obsessive. He's the kind of person who will spend an hour answering a single question. The kind of person who, when he discovers a confection he doesn't understand, will spend years figuring it out.

“Panettone,” he says, “defies every rule of baking.” So he hitchhiked to Brescia where Iginio Massari, one of the world’s great panettone masters, plies his art. And begged him to take him on as an apprentice.

When you taste [Roy’s Panettone](#), you will be grateful that he did. His Italian Christmas bread is so gossamer light it seems to evaporate in your mouth, leaving a delicious trail of flavor in its wake and the slight crackle of the crunchy topping.

It comes in many flavors, is absolutely irresistible and crazy expensive. In other words, a perfect present. The Biasetto panettone that [Giustiamo](#) imports from Italy every year is all of that as well. I should warn you that both tend to sell out early.



Christmas in a Bite

At Christmastime my German father always came home with boxes of *lebkuchen*: spicy, chewy, gingery cookies laced with marzipan and orange peel. I adored them, but as New

York's German population became assimilated, the Bavarian bakery he favored closed. We grumpily settled for the commercial kind, which proved a very poor substitute.

Then Sandy Lee returned from a stint in Germany and opened [Leckerlee](#), a seasonal bakery whose main reason for being is lebkuchen. These fabulous confections rely on the classic Nuremberg recipe, which features a nine-spice blend and a dough heavy on almonds and hazelnuts. They're everything *lebkuchen* should be—including a wonderful way to bring the true taste of Christmas back to the table.



Visions of Plum Pudding

If you've got Charles Dickens visions, you can't do better than [Talbott and Arding's traditional Christmas Pudding](#). A family recipe, it's made with three kinds of raisins, candied orange peel, organic eggs and suet from grass-fed local cows. Lots of spices and brandy too. It's hard to think of a better finale to a festive holiday feast.

An extra bonus: the crock it comes in is a perfect little bowl; I've reached for mine a million times this year, and each time I remember how much I loved eating the robust cake (it really is more cake than pudding), it originally held.

Old Menus

There's so much to love about this menu, from its slightly pretentious names (fruit cocktail Oporto!), it's mid-meal sherbet, its straightforward type.... It takes you right back to the fifties.



CHRISTMAS DINNER

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 25, 1953
Served from 12 Noon till 9:30 P. M.

Assorted Nuts

California Fruit Cocktail O'Porto
Jumbo Shrimp Supreme Nantua

Hearts of Utah Celery	Relish	Green and Ripe Olives
Cream of Peas Soup Sainte Marie		Chicken Broth Vermicelli
MOUNTAIN BROOK TROUT SAUTE		3.50
Amandine		
ROASTED YOUNG TOM TURKEY		3.50
Giblet Gravy, Dressing, Cranberry Sauce		
BAKED HONEY-CURED YORK HAM		3.75
Glaced Pineapple, Champagne Sauce		
SPRING CHICKEN SAUTE		3.50
en Casserole, Fresh Mushroom Madera Sauce, Saint Nicholas		
ROAST RIBS OF EASTERN PRIME BEEF AU JUS		4.00
Yorkshire Pudding		

Sherbet

Candied Sweet Potatoes	Snowflake Potatoes
String Beans Persille	Brussels Sprouts au Beurre

Salad de Saison des Capucins

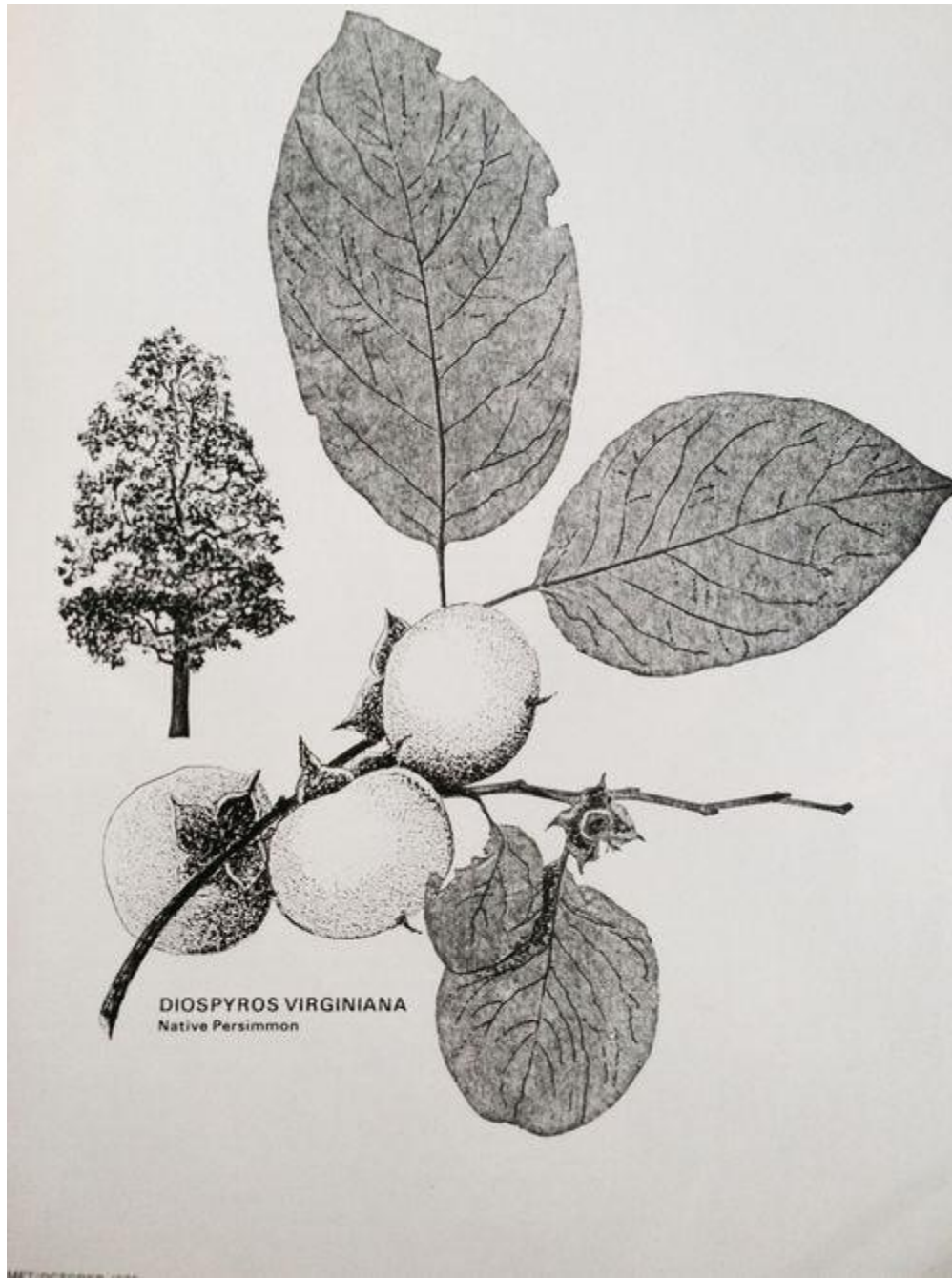
Fruit Cake	Plum Pudding, Rum Sauce
Pumpkin Pie Chantilly	Hot Mince Pie, Brandy Sauce
La Buche de Noel au Chocolat	Special Ice Cream

Tea	Milk	Coffee
-----	------	--------

HOLLYWOOD ROOSEVELT HOTEL

LORD PRINTING CO., L.A.—MENUS

Recipe



Persimmons are in season. Briefly. I was just leafing through a 1978 issue of *Gourmet*, and came across an enchanting description of a wild persimmon hunt. Do wild persimmons still exist in this country? I don't think I've ever seen one at a farmers market.

According to this article *Diospyros virginiana* or "American persimmon" has properties similar to the hachiya persimmon; both contain tannic acids that give them a powerful

astrigent quality. Apparently if you want them at peak sweetness, you wait until after the first frost to harvest the fruit.

American wild persimmons are smaller than the hachiyas you find in the market right now, but I'm sure any persimmon will work in this recipe. Marion Cunningham always sent me a persimmon pudding as a Christmas present, so this brought back a lot of memories. (This recipe, baked rather than steamed in a water bath, seems more like cake than pudding. Which is, in my opinion, another good reason to try it.)

Mother's Persimmon Pudding

Into a bowl purée enough peeled wild persimmons through a food mill to measure 2 cups, add 2 cups sugar and 2 eggs, lightly beaten, and combine the mixture well. In a small bowl stir 1 teaspoon baking soda into 1½ cups buttermilk, stir the mixture until it stops foaming, and stir it into the persimmon mixture. Into another bowl sift together 1½ cups flour, 1 teaspoon each of double-acting baking powder and cinnamon, and ⅛ teaspoon salt, add the mixture to the persimmon mixture, ¼ cup at a time, beating well after each addition, and stir in ½ cup heavy cream, ½ stick (¼ cup) butter, melted and cooled, and 1 teaspoon vanilla. Pour the batter into a buttered baking pan, 13 by 9 by 2 inches, and bake the pudding in a preheated moderate oven (350° F.) for 45 minutes, or until it is set.

(The pudding will fall as it cools.) Serve the pudding with brown sugar sauce or whipped cream.

Brown Sugar Sauce

In a saucepan combine 1 cup firmly packed light brown sugar, $\frac{1}{2}$ stick ($\frac{1}{4}$ cup) butter, softened, 1 tablespoon cornstarch, and a pinch of salt, stir in $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups hot water, and cook the mixture over moderate heat, stirring, until it is smooth and thickened slightly. Let the sauce cool for 10 minutes and stir in 1 teaspoon vanilla. Makes about $1\frac{3}{4}$ cups.

Ar Ar 1
