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## **The Power of Peppermint**

### **It's the season for swirling red-and-white candy canes**

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So you haven't been experiencing that persistent yuletide tingle deep in the back of your throat? Pass the candy canes.

The traditional red-and-white striped confection with the refreshing whoosh of peppermint is nothing less than the flavor of the month. If you need proof, check out the cover of Bon Appetit's December issue. Chocolate sandwich cookies are rolled in crushed peppermint chips.

Or cruise over to Williams-Sonoma's Web site and order a gourmet tin of peppermint bark - with a gourmet price to match.

Or wander through the eye-popping candy display at Halls on the Country Club Plaza, where old-fashioned Candy Land-style Christmas twist lollipops make stockings hung on the mantel sag from their 1-pound weight.

The National Confectioners Association estimates 1.76 billion candy canes are produced every year. Yet, despite a wide assortment of colors (orange-and-black tiger stripe), flavors (buttered popcorn) and shapes (wreaths, pretzel twists, scalloped baskets), the traditional red-and-white striped, peppermint-flavored candy cane shaped like a shepherd's crook remains the nostalgic favorite.

"We do a lot of peppermint, and each year we try to outdo the year before," says Carolyn Day, gourmet food buyer for Halls, where the aisles feature a mix of traditional sticks, canes, lollipops and ribbon candy alongside innovative designs. "I guess a new twist on peppermint this year is the wrap - cone-shaped trees made in one continuous swirl. It's hard to get that large of a piece from stem to stern."

Over the years customers "hallmark" specific items that become a part of their family's holiday tradition. "Everyone has their favorite," Day says. "Some like the peppermint straws. Some like the hot, hot red candy canes. Others like the green and white. Or the solid red. Or solid green."

Originally a crooked white stick of candy, the candy cane didn't get its red stripes until the 1900s. Because candy canes are fragile, they were mostly a regional favorite until candy makers figured out how to package their wares for shipment across the country and around the world. Today China supplies a large share of the domestic candy cane market. Large and small American candy companies continue to add to their lines to keep them fresh. Hammond's Candies, based in Denver, offers such offbeat flavors as clove, cranberry, butterscotch and sugar-plum, but the company is most famous for its 8-inch-tall, 1/2-inch round, red-and-white, peppermint candy canes.

"Peppermint is our best seller," says Linda List, vice president of sales for Hammond's Candies, which has been in business since 1920. "Fifty percent of customers buy for flavor. Fifty percent buy for color."

Hammond's supplies such gourmet specialty retailers as Halls, Williams-Sonoma, Harry and David, Crate & Barrel and Martha by Mail. Each January, Hammond's 90 employees start making 500,000 pounds of candy canes for the next holiday season. "Because every one is made by hand, we can't just push a button to get a million candy canes," List says.

Candy canes are also a year-round business for the Spangler Candy Co., which uses machines to produce 3 million candy canes a day. Made of sugar, corn syrup and flavoring, the candy cane has a shelf life of two to three years if kept in a temperature-controlled environment. Based in Bryan, Ohio, Spangler has a candy cane warehouse to store its candy before shipping it to mass market retailers and drugstores. "I think peppermint will always be the flavor people think of first; however there is a lot of interest in other colors and flavors," says Diana Moore Eschhofen, brand manager and public relations manager for Spangler.

As the maker of the mini Dum Dum lollipop, Spangler has added many of the most popular flavors available in that line to candy canes. Customers "can have the shape and still have the flavors they love," Moore Eschhofen says.

As for color, red-and-white swirls continue to make for fun holiday party decor, says Mandy Phalen, a wedding and event planner who owns Event Studio in Leawood. Plus, peppermint is a flavor that is, by its very nature, refreshing." Anytime you even put (a peppermint) in your mouth, you say, 'Aaahh!' You get a lift in your spirit."

A few years ago Phalen created a holiday luncheon for a 30-something client that she dubbed "The Power of Peppermint." The invitations had stripes. Centerpieces included hurricane vases filled with round, wrapped peppermints. The candles were scented with peppermint oil. Even the menu included red and white foods. At the end of the party, guests were treated to hot chocolate spiked with a splash of peppermint schnapps. Now swirl that with a candy cane.

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