

Taking Back Brittle

Skip the crowded malls and pricey shipping this holiday season and opt for homemade gifts. Crafting your own confections, especially a sweet and salty brittle, will impress even the hardest-to-buy-for family member—but the process won't leave you drained of Christmas cheer. Reportedly created in the late-1800s South as a batch of taffy gone wrong, brittle is the sweet marriage of sugar and corn syrup studded with nuts—below the Mason-Dixon, peanuts and pecans win out as the most popular additions. Here, Houston dessert gurus Rebecca Masson and Victoria Dearmond share their recipes for gift-worthy brittle. —*Lia Grabowski*



In her iteration, pastry chef and Fluff Bake Bar owner Rebecca Masson combines classic peanut brittle with popcorn for a nostalgic treat. While the stirring is enough to count as your daily workout, she promises it's worth the effort. The brittle will keep for a month if stored properly, but Masson assures "I doubt it will last that long."



POPCORN AND PEANUT BRITTLE

REBECCA MASSON OF FLUFF BAKE BAR, HOUSTON, TEXAS

- 1½ cups light corn syrup
- 3 cups sugar
- 2½ cups roasted, unsalted peanuts
- 4 cups natural popped corn (no salt, no butter)
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 tablespoon baking soda
- 1½ teaspoons vanilla extract
- 4 teaspoons flaky sea salt (Masson recommends Maldon)

1. Line two half-sheet pans with a silicone baking mat or generously coat with cooking spray. In a large saucepan, combine 1 cup water with corn syrup, then add sugar. Cook the mixture uncovered over medium-high heat and do not stir until the temperature reaches 260 degrees. Gently add the peanuts, popcorn,

and butter without splashing the caramel (it can scald your skin). Lower the heat to medium and stir constantly until the temperature reaches 300 to 305 degrees, about 8 to 10 minutes.

2. Remove pan from heat and add baking soda, vanilla, and salt, stirring to combine. (Don't worry, it's supposed to bubble up and increase in volume). Pour mixture onto prepared sheet pans. You might want to grab a partner to help you scrape the pot. Using a spatula, spread the mixture as thin as possible and let it cool and set up for about 30 minutes. Break the brittle into pieces and store in an airtight container. It will get sticky if left out in the humidity. You can keep it up to 1 month.

Makes about 3 pounds



As Underbelly's pastry chef, Victoria Dearmond is known for her vinegar pie topped with salt brittle. For this recipe, she suggests the best indication the brittle has reached the ideal temperature is to use your nose—when you smell caramel, it's ready. Dearmond's advice for indulging is simple: "Enjoy until you can't eat more sugar!"

PECAN WHISKEY HONEYCOMB

VICTORIA DEARMOND OF UNDERBELLY, HOUSTON, TEXAS

- ½ cup sugar
- ¼ cup light corn syrup
- ¼ cup honey
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup chopped pecans
- ¾ ounce whiskey
- 1½ teaspoons distilled vinegar
- 1½ teaspoons baking soda

1. In a medium saucepot, combine all ingredients except baking soda. (Err on the larger size when choosing a pot, as the mixture will increase in volume dramatically.) Cook mixture on high heat until it reaches 280 degrees, constantly stirring to make sure the bottom doesn't burn. Remove from heat and stir in baking soda, making sure to mix well. Mixture will double, if not triple, in size.

2. Pour into a foil-lined, greased cake pan. Do not spread mixture out—this brittle is made to look like real honeycomb, and all the big gas holes will disappear if you spread it out. Once mixture has cooled, break into small pieces and keep wrapped in plastic or in an airtight container to avoid moisture.

Makes about 1½ pounds