

city guides

Local Gifts You Can Eat

Our writer shops local and discovers the Mass. appeal of New England delicacies.

By Andrea Pyenson for MSN City Guides



Fantastic chocolate treats and other cuisine for the foodie in your life.

This holiday season there are a couple of trends shared by shoppers across the country. One is the challenge to keep the holiday spirit of generosity alive while keeping spending under control. Another is the desire to shop locally, to support friends, neighbors - anybody in our communities who, like us, is working hard to get through difficult times. Gifts of food are always appreciated at holiday time (hold the fruitcake?) and can be particularly affordable, even if you don't make them yourself. They also lend themselves to the shop-local philosophy.

When I went hunting near my home outside Boston, I found an unexpected jackpot of interesting and delectable goodies made by small local vendors - so many more options than the baked beans and seafood for which my region is known. Places to look in your area for local, artisanal edible gifts are holiday fairs and farmers' markets (if you live in a climate that allows that now), and specialty food stores. Don't be put off by the latter; "specialty" doesn't have to mean expensive. Most states also have specialty foods associations. An online search for your state's name with "specialty foods association" should direct you to some interesting options in your area.

All of the items below are sold in specialty stores and some larger markets in Massachusetts; and they all make reasonably priced gifts. If you don't want to go out to shop (and in this weather, who could blame you?) they're available online, too.

Baking with Joy

Baking with Joy began as a "very part time" activity five years ago, when a friend asked Linda Davis if she would bake some cakes he could send to clients as gifts. The clients loved them. A couple of years later Davis and her husband, Wendell, built a commercial kitchen in the basement of their Weymouth home and their fledgling company started to take off. The Davises do most of their business at farmers' markets during the warm months and online, though are starting to sell in some Massachusetts stores.

The company's signature treat is its Swedish almond cake. Davis got the recipe from a friend more than 30 years ago and made it occasionally over the years to give as gifts. Since then, she's developed chocolate and raspberry almond versions based on the original recipe, as well as chocolate buttermilk, blueberry, cinnamon brunch, lemon ricotta, lime ricotta, gingerbread and carrot cakes. Prices range from \$23-\$25; Swedish almond cakes are 4 for \$40.

More food favorites from MSN:

[Great winter beers](#)

[The art of chocolate](#)

[Great doughnuts: A baker's dozen](#)

[Looking for great loaves](#)

Cocoapelli Chocolates

Working out of the kitchen he built in what used to be his Natick, Mass., garage, carpenter-turned-chocolatier Jonathan Spillane single-handedly creates an impressive selection of hand-made, artisanal chocolates. His ganache fillings range in flavors from coconut and kona coffee to hazelnut gianduja and key lime. They are covered in dark, milk and white chocolate. He uses very high quality chocolate, made from Madagascar cocoa beans. Spillane also makes milk- and dark-chocolate-covered caramels, milk- and dark-chocolate turtles with cashews, and miniature peanut butter cups. One of his newest products is a butter crunch with dark chocolate and buttered almonds.

Spillane hand-cuts and hand-dips every caramel, ladles molded chocolates into their molds and fills each one using a pastry bag. He also decorates every piece of chocolate himself, spraying white chocolate hearts with colored cocoa butter, or applying colored cocoa butter designs from acetate transfer

sheets onto individual pieces of chocolate. A 16-piece Cocoapelli assortment box is \$20; a 32-piecebox is \$40.



Effie's goodies are made from a family recipe that originated in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.

[Effie's Oat Cakes](#)

Crisp, tan, marginally rustic-looking (with flecks of rolled oats) and completely addictive, Effie's oat cakes are made from a family recipe that originated in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia four generations ago. Joan MacIsaac, a former Boston-area caterer, grew up eating a version made by her mother (Effie), and later made them for her catering clients. Now a cooking instructor with partner Irene Costello, she decided to try to make the items that had been such a hit with her customers for a larger audience.

So in addition to teaching, the two women make oat cakes out of a commercial kitchen in Boston's Hyde Park neighborhood. These sweet, nutty, slightly salty treats are delicious on their own, as a snack with tea; or they are a perfect foundation for cheese (MacIsaac recommends cheddar in particular) or other spreads. Effie's offers a \$21 gift pack, with three packages of oat cakes in a decorative beribboned box. It comes with a recipe card. We'll let that be a surprise.

[Root Cellar Preserves](#)

Lorne and Susan Jones started Root Cellar Preserves in Wellesley, Mass., because they both grew up pickling and couldn't find any contemporary products with the homemade tastes of their youth. They use heirloom recipes - some are Lorne's mother's - and local produce and pickled products for their line of preserves. The couple designates a portion of their proceeds for local historic preservation projects.

Root Cellar's line ranges from a harvest medley ratatouille to apple cinnamon pickles to sweet corn relish, and all have an "emotional connection to New England," according to Lorne Jones. The Pickle Lovers Gift Basket (\$22.95) combines Root Cellar's three most popular pickles - Sweet & Spicy, Apple Cinnamon, Dill or Sweet. For a real splurge, go for the Sampler Gift Basket (\$59.95). This one pairs a wider selection of Root Cellar products with other, complementary Massachusetts specialty items, like tortilla chips and crackers.



One-of-a-kind delicacies made in the French tradition.

[Shy Brothers Cheese](#)

In a small, coastal town in southeastern Massachusetts, four brothers (two sets of fraternal twins) have been making mouthwatering cheese using traditional methods they learned in France's Burgundy region. Kevin, Arthur, Norman and Karl Santos are third-generation dairy farmers who took up cheese-making two years ago as a way to make their family farm profitable. Their Hannahbells are hors d'oeuvre-sized thimbles of semisoft cheese made from the milk of their Holstein and Ayrshire cows, with two kinds of edible mold imported from France.

The cheeses come in four flavors: classic French, shallot, rosemary and lavender bud. The little bells are perfect as aperitifs, which is how they're served in France. They melt beautifully, so they work well for cooking, in savory or sweet dishes. One of the brothers' neighbors dips them in chocolate and chopped pecans. The cheese keeps for about five weeks (not that you'll have it around that long). Gift packages are available with 10-11 pieces each of all four flavors, for \$15; and 50 pieces of the classic French, for \$16.

More food favorites from MSN:

[Great winter beers](#)

[The art of chocolate](#)

[Great doughnuts: A baker's dozen](#)

[Looking for great loaves](#)

Taza Chocolate

Taza Chocolate is one of a select group of certified organic, artisanal bean-to-bar chocolate makers in the U.S. The company buys cacao beans from small farming communities and co-ops in Costa Rica, Mexico and the Dominican Republic. They pay less than they would if they worked through a middle man, and the growers make significantly more than they would even at Fair Trade prices.



One of a few certified organic, artisanal bean-to-bar chocolate makers in the U.S.

The nearly two-year-old company uses artisanal, minimalist manufacturing processes, roasting the beans in its factory in Somerville, Mass., winnowing them into nibs and grinding the nibs in a Mexican stone mill. Taza's chocolate line includes 60%, 70% and 80% chocolate bars; chocolate Mexicano, discs of Oaxacan-style chocolate mixed with organic cane sugar and cinnamon, vanilla or almonds (and something co-founder Alex Whitmore learned to make in Oaxaca); and chocolate-covered cacao nibs, which make great snacks or baked into cookies or other treats.

Taza offers gift items perfect for the holidays: the Chocolate Mexicano Giftstack, 3 discs of Chocolate Mexicano (almond, cinnamon and vanilla) for \$17.50; the 3-bar Gift Bundle, a pack of all 3 bars wrapped in a box made from 100% post-consumer recycled paper, with a ribbon, at \$23.25; or the Taza Giftbox, three bars, disc of cinnamon Chocolate Mexicano, and a 2-ounce bag of chocolate-covered cacao nibs, for \$32.50.

Andrea Pyenson is a freelance writer and editor based in Boston.