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RECIPE REDUX

1879: Peppermints

By [AMANDA HESSER](#)

Peppermints were a popular European candy as early as the mid-19th century. “Brandy balls,” a sweet made with peppermint and cinnamon — “all the spices that warm the tongue, like brandy does,” explained Francine Segan, a food historian — were sold on the street in London in the 1850s. And peppermint candies in all forms were found throughout Europe by then.

But until Wrigley’s spearmint gum was introduced in America in 1893 and peppermint LifeSavers appeared on the market about a decade later, mint candy was something you mostly made at home. Making candy was one of those things that every woman seemed to know how to do, like recaning a chair and boning a lamb. A recipe for peppermints, which ran in *The Times* in 1879, is a surprise in that it actually gives precise measurements for all of the ingredients, not always the case in the newspaper’s 19th-century recipes.

Without any personal candy-making expertise, however, I quickly ran into trouble: I boiled a pound of sugar and a little water for about 5 minutes, at which point the mixture began to caramelize. Off the heat, I added peppermint extract and followed the instructions to beat the mixture until it thickened. But even if I’d beaten it with an airplane propeller, the mixture was determined to remain loose and glistening, so I gave up and poured the caramelized sugar onto a greased baking sheet.

Once cooled, the candy looked like a shiny, amber inkblot, attractive, certainly, but not terribly promising. It wasn’t candy as we know it. Then I tasted a piece and suddenly understood why you would in fact want to make your own candy at home. The caramelization of the sugar gave it an unexpected buttery flavor and bitterness, and the peppermint was alive in a way that you would never find in store-bought confections. Plus it took me all of five minutes to whip together. I like that the candies are a dark caramel color and that the mint comes as a surprise to all who try them.

I knew immediately whom to send this recipe to: Claudia Fleming, the pastry chef and an owner, with her husband, Gerry Hayden, of the North Fork Table and Inn on Long Island. Fleming is known for giving familiar desserts distinction, a style epitomized in her [chocolate](#)-caramel tarts dusted with fleur de sel, which she made while working as the pastry chef at Gramercy Tavern. “It was supereasy, superfast,” she said of the peppermint candy, “but a little, just ... well, it is what it is.”

True, but what’s wrong with a simple candy? (I guess I don’t have to agree with every chef in this column.)

Fleming continued: “I’m not a candy-cane fan, I’m not a hard-mint fan. So to make most candy palatable for

me, I think chocolate.”

Now we were getting somewhere.

She mentioned [pudding](#), and my mind leapt to chocolate-mint pudding, but Fleming went in a much more interesting direction, proving why she is well known for her work. She began with a caramel pudding, made by caramelizing sugar in a pan, then adding cream and milk and thickening the mixture with egg yolks and cornstarch (the difference between custard and pudding). To accompany this, she created a peppermint-infused white-chocolate cream, essentially a ganache that you whip like cream, and finished the dessert with shavings of chocolate-sesame halvah. All the flavors of the candy are there — the butter, the bitter, the peppermint — and there’s the familiarity of pudding. But the impression of each is compellingly skewed. We can certainly agree to agree on that.

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