



## december inspiration...candy crush

My friend Ann was the type of mother who allowed her son to eat his dessert before finishing his vegetables. She was that kind of friend too. Whether you were 10 or 100, when you spent time with her, you couldn't help feeling like a kid again. She had the ability to create a feeling of *Wonder*.

I used to attribute it to the fact that she had cut her teeth on the hospitality business, learning from a young age how to make people feel special. When she became a hotelier herself, she took that skill to an even higher level, but the more I got to know her, the more I realized that she really had a special gift. *She understood Magic*.

In her first chapter after college, before becoming a hotelier, Ann was a candy sculptor. She started a business called *Gum Drop Square*, constructing life sized sculptures from candy. Her sculptures were showcased in *Bloomingdale's* holiday windows and she stumped the contestants on the TV show *What's My Line?* After all, how many people knew, let alone imagined, life as a candy sculptor?

We became friends when our sons attended elementary school in New York City. Our first candy project together was to create a castle for the Medieval Feast - a fifth grade "rite of passage" at our sons' school. During the many hours we spent together applying candy to that castle, she learned that I had a few gingerbread houses under my belt. We decided right then and there that we would get together before the holidays and make gingerbread houses with our boys.

Ann really loved the idea of gingerbread - she didn't bake, and all of her numerous candy sculptures were made with cardboard or wooden forms. I was hardly what you would call an "expert" in the field of gingerbread baking; even so, we decided to collaborate. I would supply the gingerbread structures and she would supply the candy.



For five years running, the night before Christmas Eve, I would bake and construct the frames of 3 houses (one for each boy) using a cast iron mold I bought from Williams Sonoma years before. Baking the gingerbread for those houses was a slam dunk, but a **very** tedious and time consuming process. One side of the mold had the impression for the front or back side of the house; on the other side of the mold were impressions of the two sides of the house and parts for the roof. It meant three sides needed to be baked for each house. I would roll out the dough for the front, and after the front baked and cooled, repeat the process on that same side for the back. Then I would flip the mold and roll out the remaining dough for the two sides of the house. Since I was making three houses, I sometimes would be up all night baking and cooling, baking and cooling, baking and cooling. Why it never occurred to me to buy two extra molds, I'll never know!

By the time morning rolled around, I was exhausted, pissed off and cranky. I would cheat the last step by using glue to hold the sides of the houses together instead of the traditional glycerin frosting which, in "gingerbread house culture", is a mortal sin. "Phooey" (and a few stronger words), I would grumble, as I plugged in my trusty glue gun.

The boys and I would arrive on Christmas Eve with the three gingerbread houses precariously perched on jelly roll pans in the back of my SUV. Ann and Alexander were waiting for our arrival; their kitchen full of large cardboard boxes filled with all sorts of candy. Like a scene right out of the Nutcracker, the boxes were full of gum drops in all colors of the rainbow, colored sugar swizzle sticks, foil wrapped chocolates in various holiday shapes, peppermints and teeny gingerbread men, to name just a few.

Ann would whip up a potion of powdered sugar, water and glycerin making a "royal frosting" that was used to adhere the candy to the gingerbread. We were then ready to begin. She explained to the boys that sugar is a natural preservative and as long as the gingerbread lasted, so would their houses. "When you make a candy sculpture, the most important thing is the candy...*It's all about the candy*".

After the last gum drops were placed, and our houses complete, we would all walk down the street to *The Red Lion Inn* to meet Ann's parents, Jack and Jane, for lunch. Jack would arrive with three silver dollars, play a few coin tricks for the boys and after lunch, send them off to the *Pink Kitty* gift shop for each to select a Christmas gift. It was a magical way to spend Christmas Eve. We continued that tradition for five years until, we noticed that the boys had abandoned their posts and retreated to the living room to play video games; leaving us Moms to finishing decorating the gingerbread houses. It was a sign that it was time to move on to *new* Christmas Eve traditions.



Ann and I went on to build two more large candy castles similar to the one we decorated for the Medieval Feast. We made one for a Kips Bay Boys' and Girls' Club Designer's Auction, and a few years later, we made one as a centerpiece for a table setting my office was designing for a Lenox Hill Neighborhood House fund raiser held at the 7th Regiment Armory in New York City.

To be honest, I was really her assistant. She would design the castle's structure, and together we would apply the candy. A week or so before the event, I arrived at her apartment to find, sitting in the center of her dining table, a rudimentary structure of a castle with turrets made from cereal boxes and oatmeal containers all held together with masking tape. There it stood, ready and waiting for the next step- covering the castle with candy. Huge boxes of candy surrounded the table. I never knew where that amazing candy came from, nor did I ask. After all, that was a candy sculptor's trade secret.



The morning of the event arrived and it was time to install our table. As you can imagine, moving such a large and delicate item, was tricky, but luckily Ann's apartment was directly across the street from the armory. We loaded it onto her apartment building's luggage cart, and gingerly rolled it across Park Avenue.

It was a very, very long day, beginning early in the morning with the transporting of the items used for our table setting, unpacking the table top items and setting up the table. We then had it photographed, and gave it a final tweak before the guests arrived at 6:00 PM for cocktails.

Needless to say, we were a bit bleary eyed as we dragged ourselves back to the hall around 11:00 PM that night to break down our installation.

From a distance, we noticed that the area around our table looked like Fifth Avenue after a parade day. Whatever was served for dessert was smeared all over the tablecloth (something chocolate I gathered), the napkins were thrown on the floor, the chairs were positioned helter-skelter and two chairs were lying on their sides. I have to admit, after such a long day, it was very disconcerting and a bit creepy to see all our work strewn about.

Upon closer inspection, we noticed two of the four white chocolate stallions had been snapped off the top of the castle. All I could think of was the scene from *The Godfather*, and the next morning, instead of a real horse's head, someone would discover two white chocolate horse heads hiding under his or her sheets.

One of the armory guards was standing nearby and I said to him, "I guess the gentlemen at this table were a tad bit toasted, to say the least."

"No madam", he replied, "It wasn't the men, it was the ladies. The ladies ate the heads of the horses. I tried to stop them but they wouldn't stop! It was quite shocking; really...they were so nicely dressed!"



Sadly, I lost my friend Ann this past year, but the castle we made together still remains. I was able to replace the two damaged horses with new ones and it looks almost as good as new. I store it in a large Plexiglas box and bring it out at the beginning of the Holiday season along with my grandmother's crèche and my mother's ornaments. Sometimes, I have to make a small repair and reattach a piece of candy here and there - just a tiny bit of maintenance- with my glue gun, of course.

The holidays are about our traditions and the friends and family who have shared them. The great thing about memories is, they will last as long as we can hold onto them which, if we are lucky, is a lot longer than the shelf life of gingerbread.

I close my eyes and still hear Ann say, in her beautiful and melodic voice, "it's all about the candy, Debra"

Joann Fitzpatrick Brown  
December 27, 1949- January 28, 2016

To all of your holiday memories, large and small, and all those in between,

**Blessed Holidays!**

*Debra*

**President**

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The Christmas tree at Ann's beloved Blantyre.