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Be prepared

Tactics to handle guerrilla gifters

BY GENEVIEVE RAJEWSKI

YOUR BROTHER'S NEW girlfriend surprises you with homemade cookies. A co-worker stops you as you try to sneak out early on Christmas Eve to hand you a Starbucks gift card. The cousin who never even e-mails arrives at the family holiday party toting a Crate & Barrel box with your name on it.

No matter how well you thought you did crossing names off your shopping list, you're bound to encounter a similar scenario at least once this holiday season. And nothing is more embarrassing than staring, slack-jawed and empty-handed, into the beaming face of a surprise gift-giver.

So what's the well-meaning soul to do, short of acquiring psychic abilities or enough cash and time to buy gifts for anyone and everyone?

According to Leah Ingram, whose book *You Shouldn't Have! How To Give Gifts They'll Never Forget* (McGraw-Hill, 2001) includes a chapter on holiday gifts, the first line of defense is to respond "graciously, with lots of 'thank you's.'"

"You should not immediately start rummaging through your pocketbook or race off to your refrigerator to grab a gift in return," says Ingram by e-mail. "While it would be nice to always have a gift to give someone who gives you a gift unexpectedly, I'd rather have you say something like, 'Wow, I'm so flattered and this is so unexpected. Thank you. And I'm a little embarrassed that I don't have anything for you,' than run off and grab the first thing you find to give in return."

That said, Ingram is personally prepared for guerrilla gifters. "I have a gift closet and use it all the time," she admits. Inside, she keeps note cards and inexpensive, universally appreciated gifts such as candles, picture frames, and soaps. "I also stock my fridge with bottles of wine and sparkling cider and boxes of chocolate, so I have fresh food to give as well during the holidays. Just be sure that you're not giving a bottle of wine to an alcoholic," Ingram cautions. "Seriously, I made this mistake once and felt awful about it — I had no idea. So in addition to stocking up on bottles of wine, I always keep bottles of sparkling cider on hand, so that if I'm unsure of someone's relationship with alcohol, I can bring the bottle of sparkling cider and feel confident that I'm not insulting anyone or making anyone feel embarrassed (including myself)."

Here, you'll find suggestions on where to find such goods priced at around \$10 to create your own gift cache. But before you ring up a bunch of items, keep in mind that you don't need to tote gifts around just in case you're ambushed by someone bearing an unexpected present. "Rather, give a gift in return, if you'd like, at the next social occasion or natural gift-giving time that you share with this person," recommends Ingram, "such as when you go to their house for dinner or when you're attending a neighborhood holiday party all together."



LIGHT FARE: cupcake tea lights from Black Ink.

They've got the goods

- **Absolutely Fabulous**, 1309 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, (617) 864-0656.
- **Best Cellars**, 745 Boylston Street, Boston, (617) 266-2900; 1327 Beacon Street, Brookline, (617) 232-4100; www.bestcellars.com.
- **Black Ink**, 101 Charles Street, Boston, (617) 723-3883; 5 Brattle Street, Cambridge, (617) 497-1221.
- **Bowl & Board**, 1063 Mass Ave, Cambridge, (617) 661-0350.
- **Cardullo's**, 6 Brattle Street, Cambridge, (617) 491-8888.
- **Christina's**, 1261 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, (617) 492-7021.
- **Dairy Fresh Candies**, 57 Salem Street, Boston, (617) 742-2639.
- **Economy Hardware**, 219 Mass Ave, Boston, (617) 536-4280; 438 Mass Ave, Cambridge, (617) 864-330.
- **Lush**, 166 Newbury Street, Boston, (617) 375-5874.
- **Paper Source**, 338 Boylston Street, Boston; 1361 Beacon Street, Brookline, (617) 264-2800; 1810 Mass Ave, Cambridge, (617) 497-1077; www.paper-source.com.
- **Rugg Road Paper Company**, 105 Charles Street, Boston, (617) 742-0002.
- **The Shop at the Union**, 356 Boylston Street, Boston, (617) 536-5651, ext. 175; www.wel.org/index.php?page=86.
- **Target**, various locations; www.target.com.

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CANDLES, PICTURE FRAMES, AND SOAPS

Fortunately, it's easy to find the type of staples Ingram keeps in her gift closet without sacrificing individuality. For candles with colorful patterns, look to **Paper Source**, which carries **hand-painted candles from South Africa**, including tall tapers (\$13.20/two), short tapers (\$8.80/two), and pillar candles (\$8.80). **Rugg Road Paper Company's** gingerbread-man and peppermint-candy **floating candles** (\$5.95/four) look good enough to eat, as do **Black Ink's** foil-wrapped **cupcake tea lights** (\$2.50). Also realistic-looking and unusual are **Black Ink's** **matchstick pillar candles** (\$15.50/five).

With frames, go for maximum impact with **Bowl & Board's** bright-red lacquer **cell Umbra frame** (\$13), which holds one four-by-six-inch photo, one four-by-four photo, and a pair of two-by-two photos.

Meanwhile, **Lush** offers a decadent array of handmade, cruelty-free soaps and bath products that, in their cellophane bags, resemble sweets. The bright-pink **Creamy Candy bath bar** (\$4.80) is rich

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with vanilla, cocoa butter, and almond oil, and the **After 8:30 massage bar** (\$7.20), made from cocoa butter, dark chocolate, white chocolate, and peppermint oil, looks and smells like a different sort of after-dinner indulgence. At once both floral- and woodsy-smelling, the **Flower Tub bubble bar** (\$5.50) creates a green-tinted bubble bath filled with dried flower petals.

At **Absolutely Fabulous**, you'll find exquisitely scented **Gianna Rose Atelier French-milled soaps** shaped like a vintage mannequin (\$9.50), a "chocolate milk" cow (\$9.50), and a **Scottie dog** (\$24) that comes in an adorable, no-wrapping-paper-required plaid box.

WINE, SPARKLING CIDER, CHOCOLATES, AND OTHER EDIBLES

At **Best Cellars** you'll find a wonderful selection of sparkling red and white wines priced around or under \$10, including **Brunellesco Pinot Grigio 2001** (\$8.50), **Crane Lake Merlot 2001** (\$7.50), and **Seaview Brut 1999** (\$10) — a sparkling wine made exactly like fine French Champagne but from grapes grown in Australia.

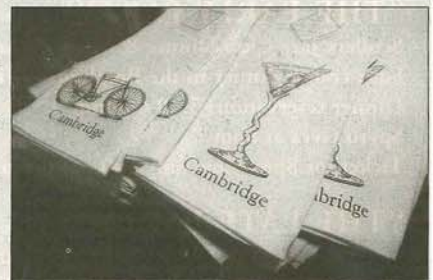
Don't worry that choosing to go the safe route with sparkling cider will fail to impress. **Cardullo's** offers an enticing and exotic selection, including **sparkling pear-apple juice** (\$4.99), **sparkling mulled cider** (\$5.39), **sparkling rose-flavored beverage** (\$5.49), **sparkling cranberry beverage** (\$5.99), and **sparkling apple cider** (\$5.99).

Dairy Fresh is an old-school oasis of rich chocolate candies smack in the middle of the North End. Here, opt for a one-pound box of rich **cashew-caramel turtle fudge** (\$6.99), with two layers of chocolate fudge surrounding a layer of caramel and cashews. Or go with the always-popular one-pound box of milk

and dark chocolates (\$11.99) — including butter-crunch, cashew turtles, pecan turtles, vanilla caramels, and fudge meltaways — in a classic white gift box.

Christina's offers deceptively simple-looking imported **Côte d'Or chocolate bars** (\$7.78). The hefty Belgian dark and milk chocolate come plain or with hazelnuts, raisins, pralines, cashews, or almonds. At **Christina's**, you'll also find imported **Champ's Reserve French mustards** (\$8.16) in flavors such as herbs de Provence, curry, honey, apple brandy, garlic, orange, and fennel.

And for the easiest gifts around, head to **Target**, which has a vast array of food gifts prepackaged in smart, creative wrapping — allowing you to fill out the nametag and go. A



ABSOLUTELY FABULOUS "Cambridge" dishtowels from, well, *Absolutely Fabulous*.

cocoa crate (\$12.99) features four gourmet flavors, including cappuccino and tiramisu. **Ghirardelli glass cookie mugs** (\$8.99) come with the ingredients for fresh-baked cookies (such as chocolate-chip-oatmeal) artfully layered inside. Also attractively packaged are a set of **gourmet popping corns in Mason jars** (\$9.99) and an **olive boat**

(\$12.99) topped with glass jars of pimento, black, and green olives.

FOR THE OFFICE

At work, practicality rules — especially since you might end up keeping the gift for yourself. Keep managers from catching your co-workers surfing the Web with a **computer rearview mirror** (\$9.94) from **Economy Hardware**. The store also carries the less controversial **Snail Mail** (\$4.99), a Koziol-esque rubber snail that holds a roll of stamps. Just fill it up and give it away.

Also practical are **Clipiola Italian paper clips** (\$7.98). These cool circular paper clips, available in brass gold or zinc silver at **Paper Source**, come 125 to a tin. And, if you'd rather forsake the practical route, **Brookline Booksmith** sells a portable **Executive Hammock** (\$16) that supposedly works when attached to two stationary objects (or peons).

FOR OUT-OF-TOWNERS

If you're not sure if a visiting relative will have a gift for you, bring an original souvenir to the family party. **Absolutely Fabulous** sells a "Greetings from Massachusetts" candle tin (\$16) with a label that mimics vintage travel advertisements. The Inman Square shop also carries a woven white "Cambridge" dishtowel (\$12) that proclaims the name of the fair city above a picture of either a martini glass or a bicycle. Finally, the **Shop at the Union** sells **Boston fortune cookies** (\$6) that come in a Chinese-food take-out container and include "fortunes" printed with Hub-centric trivia.

WRITE A CARD AND WRAP IT UP

Of course, there's little use in stocking up on small gifts if you lack the means to make them presentable. For portability without sacrificing style, check out **Paper Source's** large

PHOTOS BY BRUCE MYREN



TAKE TWO: Chinese-food take-out cartons from *Rugg Road*.

selection of **silk-screened miniature gift cards** (\$4.95/eight) with Christmas, Hanukkah, and seasonal imagery, including a stunning silver tree on a background of snow white and blue. Dress up wine and sparkling cider with **Bowl & Board's** brightly colored **cotton bottle bags** (\$6). Small gifts look so much greater in **Rugg Road Paper Company's vellum Chinese-food take-out cartons** (\$2.25-\$5.75), which come printed with red Christmas ornaments and other holiday images. The shop also sells **felt gifts bags**, such as a gray bag (\$9.95) decorated with leaves and smaller, brightly colored versions (\$6.98) decorated with a Santa, a snowman, or an ornament.

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