

For Mail-Order Food Gifts, Sweets Top the Wish List

By MARIAN BURROS

THIS year, this annual mail-order column has almost twice as many sweets as savories. That is in part because there are many more mail-order desserts than there are mail-order vegetables, meat, cheese or grain dishes.

But after watching the guests at a mail-order party at my home a few months ago, it was easy to conclude that people are far more interested in sweets as gifts than they are in, say, the best buffalo-milk mozzarella or smoked fish. They are also less discriminating about sweets than they are about any other category of food.

The 20 or so items in this column were whittled down from about 40 or 50. In order to eat as little as possible of each, especial-

First of two articles.

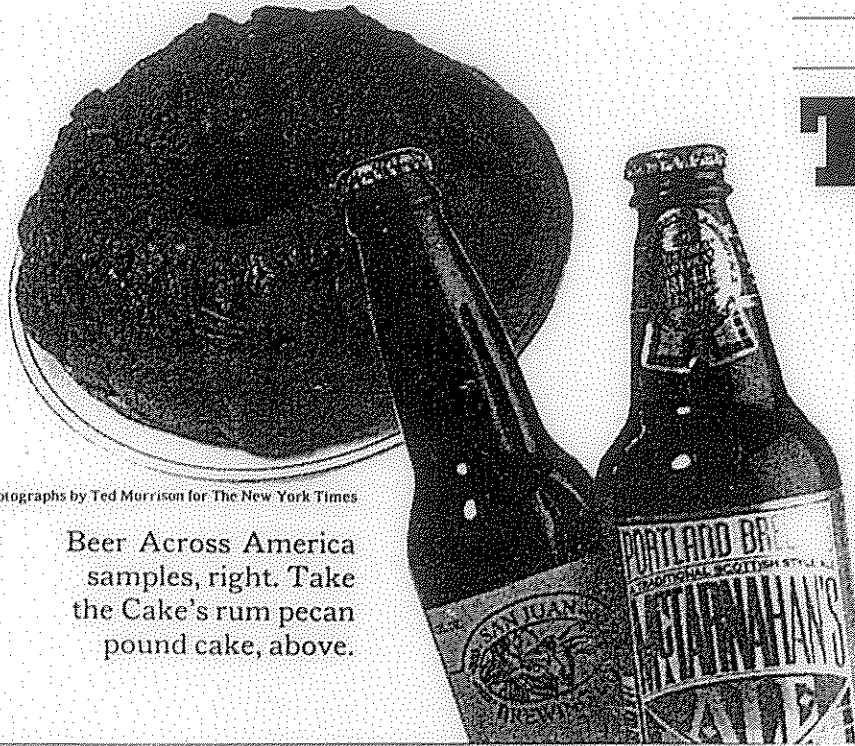
ly those I like, I decided to share them with a group of friends this year; hence, the party. I asked them to comment on what they ate, so I could compare their thoughts with my tasting

notes. We differed on many things, something particularly noticeable when it came to the desserts. Some that I thought were too dry or that had no discernible flavor beyond sweet were routinely described by the guests as good to excellent. Their impressions didn't change my mind, but they did prove the appeal of sweet things. When the desserts were put out, the guests flocked to the table and didn't move until they had sampled each one.

Their comments about the savories were far more pointed. What almost everyone loved unreservedly was D'Artagnan's truffle mousse, but many were not as fond as I of the salmon torta. Both are included in the following list.

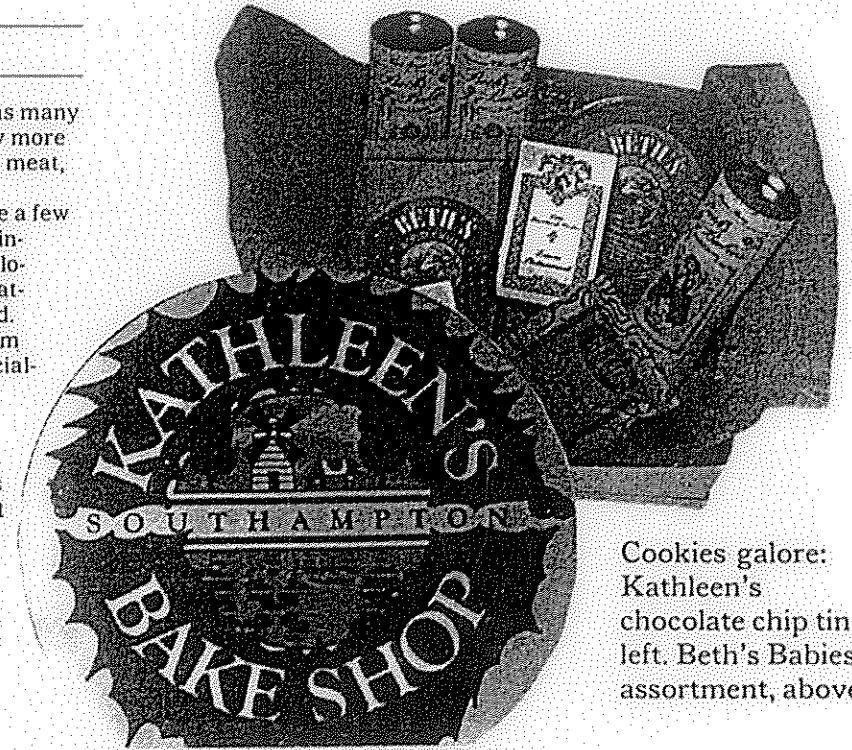
None of the desserts had any bad marks, although the unquestioned favorite was the praline pumpkin cheesecake from Culinary Crafts.

As people have become busier and busier, buying and gift-giving by mail have become more and more popular but, with rare exceptions, the very large mail-order companies are not providing food that is any better than what can be purchased in the local supermarket. So this list concentrates on small companies with lots of personal service. Though the party's over, feel free to share



Photographs by Ted Morrison for The New York Times

Beer Across America samples, right. Take the Cake's rum pecan pound cake, above.



Cookies galore: Kathleen's chocolate chip tin, left. Beth's Babies assortment, above.

WILLOW RIVER FARMS, Route 1, Box 148, Brookshire, Tex., 77423; (800) 939-3720, in Houston (713) 525-8468.

At last a fruitcake anyone could love: the brandied version is \$9 a pound and the traditional (yes, with glacéed cherries) is \$7 a pound. Fruitcakes come in 1-, 2- and 3-pound loaves; shipping extra.

Visa, Mastercard, check, money order. Cutoff for Christmas, Dec. 10.

The Living Section

The New York Times

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 1994