



Holidays an excellent time to check out healthy gifts

The Christmas shopping rush is on, and already the malls and parking lots are filling up. Looking for alternatives? The perfect store might be just around the corner, and with incredibly convenient hours. No, we don't mean shopping the Web. We're talking about your neighborhood grocery store.

For the first time in months, we took a casual stroll through a few grocery stores in the Honolulu area. Some were large; others were smaller, mom-and-pop types.

What they had in common was an incredible choice of wonderful taste sensations, many of which would add mouth-awakening flavors to any bag lunch, home-cooked meal or post-holiday treat.

When time and patience run low, everyone seems to turn to those luscious decadent sweets that add to the year-end bulge. Here's a way to show someone you care without adding to the seasonal load of high-fat calories.

>> For those with a serious sweet tooth, there are healthy choices. Packages of dried fruits such as peaches, nectarines, cinnamon-coated raisins, dried cherries, mangoes, papayas and Craisins (the dried cranberry raisin look-alikes) can be guilt-free sweet treats with a phytochemical boost. Buy one package, or make a customized mix with your own creative packaging.

>> Give a tropical jam basket with taro rolls for immediate enjoyment or specialty crackers for any time later.

>> The condiment section offers wonderful choices of unique flavored mustards, salsas, chutneys and local-style salad dressings that can turn a plain cheese sandwich into a gourmet delight, or simple hot dogs into a special meal.

>> Neighbor island coffees and various tea blends, bundled with one or two mugs, can set the tone for jump-starting the day or slowing down at the end.

There's no need for dessert with so much full flavor in the cup.

>> For those just starting out, bundling basic kitchen tools such as measuring cups and spoons, wooden mixing spoons and a whisk with a few specialty spice blends or seasoning packages is a great gift idea. Add a few of your favorite recipe cards for a personal touch.

>> Do you want to give a fruit basket and choose the fruit? No problem. Some stores will even place your choice of food items into a basket and wrap them. Do-it-yourself fruit baskets are now simpler than ever.

>> Why not give a certificate for a sushi platter -- a gift to enjoy when the time is right? What a great way to end a hectic week or throw a spontaneous party. Maybe you'll be invited!

>> Think local. The holiday season is a great time to try wonderful specialty food products from all islands. How about some Hawaiian vanilla, candied ginger and herbed vinegar?

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