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Fine Living: Gingerbread creations, weatherizing and going tankless

By PJ Bremier IJ correspondent

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'YOU GET YOUR choice of house with royal frosting, candy and all the snow you want,' John McAteer says enthusiastically as he explains the concept behind Gingerbread Builders, a new shop in the Strawberry Village he's opened with family friend and former pastry chef, Bridget McNeeley Radachy.

Snow?

'Shhh,' he whispers, accepting some dollar bills over the counter from a young boy whose eyes haven't left the extra bag of wildly colorful decorations he's received in exchange. Even though he does trade-show displays as a profession, McAteer is taking his role as Gingerbread House purveyor as seriously as any Christmastime Santa Claus. 'It's powdered sugar.'

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Provided by John McAteer Families can work together to create an edible house for the holidays...

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On this cloudy afternoon, several families are clustered at cheerful red-and-white table Seesets, intently focused on carefully applying decorations to their gingerbread creation.

Against a wall, clear bags of sweet "construction materials" (\$1 to \$6) are tucked into shallow bins. They range from the traditional options such Lifesavers, jelly beans, Dots and Nico Wafers to the more unusual Power Belts, a sugar strip of gummy candy used for roof tiles.

Then, there are the accessories: ice cream cones to be upended and transformed into outdoor trees or chimneys; birdhouses awaiting peanut butter and birdseed; and Rice Krispies cars soon to be tricked out with Dots for tires and taffy for windshields.

"One kid made a spoiler out of licorice,"

recalls McAteer. "They're so creative."

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The houses, themselves, come in three sizes (priced from \$27.50 to \$52) and are baked by City Baking Co. in San Francisco to precise specifications for the perfect spicy house, edible for up to two weeks.

Local schools and the Mothers clubs of Marin and San Francisco have been Gingerbread Builders' biggest supporters by far, but the biggest surprise for McAteer has been the couples that come in for "date night."

"I hadn't planned on that and there have been quite a few," he says. "It's great!"

Gingerbread Builders is in Strawberry Village at 750 Redwood Highway, Suite 1210, in Mill Valley near Ideal Stationary. Private parties, custom-built or predecorated houses and delivery service are available. The store is open from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day through Dec. 31, except Christmas Day.

For more information, call 380-1731 or visit www.gingerbreadbuildersco.com.

Keep heat in, taxman out

If you're planning on weatherizing your home, do it before Dec. 31 and save on your taxes this year. That's the hot tip from reader Arthur Young of Corte Madera.

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In just a few weeks, he writes, "the IRS's tax credit of 30 percent -- not a refund, but an automatic tax deduction -- disappears. It means free money for energy-efficiency conscious Marinites. It means up to \$1,500 straight off your bottom-line tax bill."

That's true, says IRS spokesman Jesse Weller. The Nonbusiness Energy Property Credit equals 30 percent of what a homeowner spends on eligible energy-saving improvements, up to a maximum tax credit of \$1,500 for the combined 2009 and 2010 tax years.

These improvements include certain high-efficiency heating and air-conditioning systems, water heaters and stoves that burn biomass (fuel that includes wood, wood waste or residues such as wood pellets, certain crops and plants) and the labor costs involved for installing them.

Energy-efficient windows, skylights and doors, qualifying insulation and certain roofs also qualify for the credit but not the labor costs to install them.

Make sure the improvements are eligible before purchasing, though. According to the IRS, a homeowner can normally rely on the manufacturer's tax credit certification statement usually found on the manufacturer's website or with the product packaging.

This certification is different from the Department of Energy's Energy Star label, and not all Energy Star labeled products qualify for the tax credits. Although, Weller says the IRS does not list qualifying energy property, the Department of Energy does online under the link "Tax Credits for Energy Efficiency" at www.energystar.gov.

All you need to claim the credit is to complete Form 5695 Residential Energy Credits with your tax return, he says.

"Keep records, receipts, and manufacturers certification statement with your tax records in case you're asked to support the claim in the future," Weller says.

For more information, visit the Energy Incentives for Individuals in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act site at www.irs.gov.

Tankless in Marin

Thanks to Arthur Young for this tip, too. Check out tankless water heaters; he says they can last twice as long as conventional tank water heaters, save up to 50 percent on hot water gas, free up space and give endless hot water.

He's right, says David Shevick, owner of Tanknot, a tankless hot water heater company in San Rafael, and "you'll also lower your carbon footprint."

If you install one before the end of the month, he says, you can take advantage of the expiring tax credit as all of the ones he sells are eligible. (Tanknot installations range from \$2,700 to \$3,500 including labor.)

"The most important thing about installing a tankless water heater is where you put it," he insists. "Keep it close to the fixtures. That affects the hot water delay."

For example, on a ranch-style house where a tank water heater could be in the garage by the kitchen, Shevick might put a tankless hot water heater outside the bedroom wing, near the bath fixtures, and pipe the hot water back to the kitchen.

Homeowners can calculate their own savings with a tankless hot water heater by clicking on the Tankless Calculator icon at www.tanknot.com. For more information, call 794-2084.

PJ Bremier writes on home, garden, design and entertaining topics every Saturday and also on her blog at DesignSwirl.net. She may be contacted at P.O. Box 412, Kentfield, CA 94914, or at pj@mindspring.com.

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