Sugar Plums

2 C whole raw almonds
1/4 C honey
2 t grated orange zest
1 1/2 t ground cinnamon
1/2 t ground allspice
1/2 t freshly-grated nutmeg
1 C finely-chopped dried apricots
1 C finely-chopped pitted dates
1 C confectioners’ sugar

Preheat oven to 400˚. Arrange the almonds on a baking sheet in a single layer and toast in the oven for 10 minutes; do not let them burn. Set aside to cool, then finely chop.

While almonds are toasting or cooling, combine the honey, the orange zest, cinnamon, allspice and nutmeg in a medium-sized mixing bowl. Add the chopped almonds, apricots and dates. Mix well.

Pinch off rounded teaspoon-sized pieces of the mixture and roll them into balls. [You will have to exert considerable pressure in the palm of your hand to make the mixture stay in form.] Rinse your hands often, as the mixture is very sticky. Roll the balls in confectioners’ sugar, then refrigerate in single layers between sheets of waxed paper in airtight containers for up to 1 month. Their flavor improves after ripening for several days.

This recipe makes approximately 75 sugar plums, depending on how large you shape them. Think of large marbles.

[Sugar plums really do have to be made ahead, at least a week before you plan to serve them. The flavors need to blend for a good while. The taste is strange at first: they are sweet, but in a 19th-century way. To 21st-century palates, accustomed to far richer foods that are more aggressively sugary, these sugar plums may seem more savory than sweet. They will grow on you, and can be served with punch, port, red wine or brandy.]

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