

Second Place: Julia Truelove, Raleigh

Bacon & Beer Caramel Popcorn

Bacon & Beer Caramel Popcorn Crunch

1 lb. bacon
2 bags microwave popcorn
3/4 cup peanuts
1 12 oz. beer
2 T butter
1 1/2 c packed light brown sugar
1 c heavy cream
1 t vanilla
1/4 t ground cayenne pepper
Pinch of sea salt

In a large skillet or on a plate in the microwave, cook the bacon until crisp. Remove the bacon and drain on a paper towel lined plate. Break up into 1/2 inch pieces and set aside.

Preheat the oven to 250. Butter 2 large cookie sheets. Pop each of the bags of popcorn separately by following instructions on the bag. Remove the un-popped kernels before pouring the popped popcorn onto the cookie sheets. Allow to cool, add the bacon and peanuts, evenly split amongst the pans, and toss to combine. Set aside.

Bring the beer to a gentle boil in a large saucepan over medium heat, cooking and stirring occasionally for about 10 minutes until reduced to 1 cup. Stir in the butter and brown sugar, and cook for 10 - 12 minutes until thick, stirring only if it is going to boil over. Cook to 235 on a candy thermometer, or to test if it's done, drop a bit in ice water and it should form a soft ball. If not, keep cooking. When ready, stir in the cream and keep cooking until sauce thickens, about 6 - 8 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in vanilla, cayenne and salt.

Pour the caramel sauce over the popcorn, peanuts and bacon and stir to completely coat. Bake for 45 minutes, stirring at 15 minute intervals. Remove from oven and cool completely. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator until the next tailgate party.