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Cranberry-Pistachio Cheese Ball

Makes 2 "pinecones" or 2 cups

Put a seasonal twist on the table's cheese ball with a little pinecone styling and garnishing. Of course, this presentation works with any cheese ball recipe, but we chose a cheese with a little kick, pepper jack, and some mix-ins that add a little holiday color. The complementary flavors blend together nicely with just the right crunch experienced along the way. The cheese ball's personality emerges with some simple shaping and easy layering of almond slices. It's an easy, yet elegant, appetizer for any holiday table.

8 oz. (1 pkg.) cream cheese, room temperature
8 oz. pepper jack cheese, finely shredded
1/2 cup dried cranberries, coarsely chopped
1/2 cup pistachios, coarsely chopped
1 tbsp. parsley, chopped
5-6 oz. sliced almonds
Rosemary sprigs for garnish (optional)
Fresh cranberries for garnish (optional)
Crackers for serving

(1) In a medium bowl, mix the softened cream cheese, shredded pepper jack cheese, cranberries, pistachios, and chopped parsley, and stir until evenly combined.

(2) Scoop half the cheese mixture from the bowl and roughly mold the cheese into a pinecone shape. Repeat with the other half.

(3) Add sliced almonds to the surface of the cheesy pinecones by inserting and layering the nuts. Start at the "end" of the pinecone. Overlap the sliced almonds until the entire surface is covered. (This decorating step works best when the cheese is soft. If needed, use the tip of a paring knife to poke a hole for the almond slice. Also, you'll need extra almonds in order to find whole slices and to compensate for any breakage that may occur.)

(4) Plate and garnish with a few long sprigs of rosemary and a few fresh cranberries. If not serving immediately, refrigerate. Remove from the refrigerator 30 minutes prior to serving to allow for softening. Serve with your favorite crackers.

Do-Ahead Steps:

(1) Make the cheese ball up to one day ahead of time. Decorate with the almond slices a few hours prior to serving.