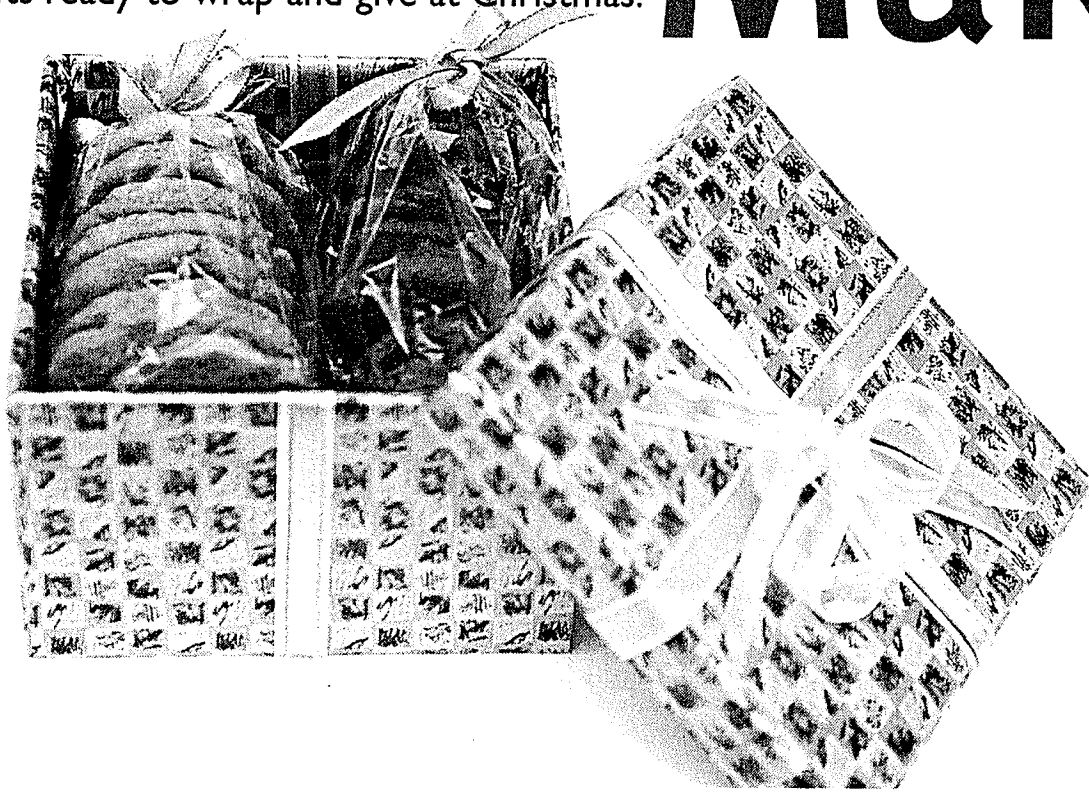


Merry Cookie Making

A cookie-stocked pantry means a sweet array of homemade gifts ready to wrap and give at Christmas.



HANDMADE COOKIES GIFT-WRAPPED FOR HOLIDAY SHARING

Christmas time inevitably finds me ensconced in the kitchen for days, happily baking batch after batch of cookies. I love the feel of the dough, the warmth of the kitchen on a winter day, the spicy, buttery or chocolatey smells that fill my house, and the cheer that so many tins of cookies bring to a Christmas gathering. But even more important than these pleasures are the sense of security and peace the process brings. That's the real reason I spend so much time baking holiday treats. With a cookie-stocked pantry, I have a variety of delicious homemade gifts ready to wrap and give, with no time wasted in a busy shopping mall.

Over the years, I have found that my boxes of lovingly made cookies are among the best-loved gifts opened Christmas morning. So, in the spirit of giving, I am sharing a few of my favourite cookie recipes with the readers of EAT magazine, to make and share with their own families. These recipes are ones that have been begged and pleaded for by my friends and family, ones that are worth the time spent baking them, ones that keep and ship well, but are still utterly delicious. I have a penchant for old-fashioned, old-world cookies, redolent with spices and nuts, but this collection should have something for every aunt, in-law, grandparent or chocolate-loving child in your family. Merry cookie making!

FINK FAMILY LEBKUCHEN

These long-keeping spiced honey cookies are my family's favourite Christmas tradition, the one cookie we make without fail every year. I give some away as gifts every holiday season and have been asked for the recipe by almost everyone who has eaten one.

Lebkuchen are rock-hard, almost like candy, when they are first baked, and the spices are too overwhelming at first as well. The cookies are meant to be "aged" in cookie tins for several weeks. After two or three weeks, lebkuchen soften to an almost cake-like consistency and the spices mellow into a wonderful symphony of taste. They keep about three months at room temperature, getting softer and yummi-er as the weeks go by, making these cookies perfect for mailing away to relatives and for sitting wrapped under the tree. Bonus: Lebkuchen freeze like a dream.

3/4 cup packed dark brown sugar

3/4 cup liquid honey

2 Tbsp butter

1 egg

4 tsp grated orange rind

2 tsp each nutmeg and ginger

1 tsp each cinnamon and allspice

1/2 tsp each baking soda and salt

2-1/2 cups all-purpose flour

3/4 cup minced dried fruit (cranberries, golden raisins, Thompson raisins, pineapple, candied peel, apricots)

3/4 cup slivered almonds, finely chopped

Glaze: 1 cup icing sugar whisked with 2 Tbsp warm water

In a saucepan, heat sugar, honey and butter until sugar dissolves; do not boil. Scrape this mixture into a bowl. Let cool to warm room temperature, but do not let it sit too long.

Stir in egg, orange rind, nutmeg, ginger, allspice, cinnamon, baking soda and salt. Stir in flour in three additions. Stir in fruit and nuts. At this point you can make the cookies the old-fashioned way, or the easy way. (Hint: The old-fashioned way gives a higher yield and makes for slightly better tasting cookies.)

The old-fashioned way: Cover the dough and refrigerate for at least eight hours and up to three days. On a lightly floured surface, roll out a quarter of the dough at a time into a 1/4-inch-thick rectangle. Cut into 2-by-1-inch bars. Transfer bars to greased cookie sheet, spacing them 1/2-inch apart. Bake at 350°F for approximately 15 minutes, or until dry on top and golden on the bottom. Remove to racks and let cool.

The easy way: Please note this very important point—this method must be done while the dough is still warm and soft. Butter a 10-by-15-inch jellyroll pan and cut a piece of parchment to fit the inside exactly. Moisten your hands with warm water and pat out the dough into the jellyroll pan, making it as thin and even as possible (I can't remember if one batch of dough fits into two pans or one). Bake at 325°F for 25 minutes, or more, until the bars have puffed slightly and look dry and cooked. Remove from oven and immediately cut into 2-by-1-inch bars. Let cool in the pan until cool enough to touch, then remove to wire racks to cool completely.

Either way: Let the cookies cool completely before glazing each one with a plain icing-sugar glaze. Let the glaze

dry overnight, then pack the cookies into airtight tins, with a piece of waxed paper between each layer.

The cookies are rock-hard, like candy, when they first cool off, but in two to three weeks, they will soften. These cookies keep for more than 10 weeks at room temperature and freeze well. Hint: They soften up much more quickly if frozen for a few days.

TRADITIONAL BISCOTTI

Homemade biscotti are a perfect cookie gift. They are durable, great keepers and a hundred times more delicious than any you can buy in the coffee shop. Even better, these traditional lemon-almond-anise biscotti taste much better a week (and longer) after they are made than when they are freshly baked.

For several years, I gave Christmas gift baskets of homemade biscotti and fair-trade coffee beans to the coffee lovers in my family. This was an inexpensive way for me to give gifts during my poor starving student years. I stopped making biscotti the first year I could afford to buy "real" gifts. Apparently, this was a mistake. My father and brother-in-law, especially, moped around Christmas morning, bemoaning their missing biscotti. I was gratified to learn that my homemade offerings had been so loved and appreciated; I have never again failed to make biscotti for my family at Christmas.

3 cups all-purpose flour

1 tsp. baking powder

1/4 tsp baking soda

1/4 tsp salt

2 eggs
 2 egg whites
 1 cup white sugar
 1 Tbsp lightly crushed anise seeds
 Zest of 1 lemon
 1/4 tsp almond extract
 1/4 cup butter, melted
 1 cup chopped almonds

Preheat oven to 325°F.

Sift together the flour with the baking powder, soda and salt. Beat the eggs and egg whites until foamy. Add the sugar and beat until thick and creamy. Beat in the anise seeds, lemon zest, almond extract, melted butter and almonds.

Using a wooden spoon, stir the flour mixture into the wet ingredients, mixing well. Divide the dough in two and place half on a well-floured surface. Shape into a smooth, flat-topped log about 1-1/2 inches in diameter and about 15 inches long. If the dough is too soft to hold its shape, work in a little more flour, but not too much. Place on a lightly greased cookie sheet. Repeat with remaining dough. Place on sheet at least 4 inches away from the other log.

Bake for about 25 minutes, until they feel firm to the touch. Remove from the oven and let cool for 15 minutes. Turn down the oven to 300°F. Place logs on a cutting board and slice on the diagonal into 1/2-inch slices. Arrange the slices on two baking sheets, leaving room for air circulation, and bake them again for 20-30 minutes, rotating the trays halfway through baking.

Let the biscotti cool on wire racks. Makes about 2-1/2 dozen biscotti. Their flavour will improve in a few days. They will last about a month if nobody eats them first!

Biscotti Variations

Chocolate-hazelnut: Eliminate the anise seeds and lemon zest. Substitute 1/3 cup unsweetened cocoa powder for 1/4 cup of the flour, use 1 tsp vanilla extract instead of almond and substitute toasted chopped hazelnuts for the almonds.

Gingerbread: Increase baking powder to 1-1/2 tsp, add 1-1/2 tsp ground ginger, 2 tsp cinnamon and 1/4 tsp of ground cloves. Eliminate the almond extract, the anise seeds and the lemon zest. Use only 1 whole egg (rather than 2), reduce the sugar to 3/4 cup and add 1/4 cup fancy or light molasses.

MINT CHOCOLATE BUTTER CRISPS

These simple cookies are my own personal favourite Christmas cookie. They are easy to make and cook up into heavenly melt-in-your-mouth buttery cookies with a refreshing hit of mint-chocolate. I recommend doubling the recipe!

2-1/4 cups all-purpose flour, sifted before measuring
 1/2 tsp salt
 1-1/4 cups unsalted butter, softened
 1 cup icing sugar
 2 tsp vanilla extract
 1-1/2 cups mint-flavoured chocolate chips OR finely chopped high-quality
 mint-flavoured dark chocolate (my preference is Denman Island Cool Mint chocolate bars)

Preheat oven to 325°F.

Whisk together the flour and salt.

In a separate bowl, cream the butter. Sift in the icing sugar and mix until light and fluffy. Beat in the vanilla. Add the dry ingredients to the creamed mixture in two parts, beating well after each addition. Stir in the chocolate chips or chopped chocolate.

Roll pieces of the dough into 3/4-inch round balls. Place on a lightly greased cookie sheet. Using the bottom of a drinking glass that has first been dipped in icing sugar, flatten each dough ball into rounds about 1-1/2" to 2" in diameter. Bake for 10 to 12 minutes, until light golden around the edges. Remove to racks to let cool. Makes about 4 dozen cookies.

HEIDI'S CHOCOLATE FUDGE-OAT BARS

I have made these sumptuous bars so frequently for friends and family that they have come to be called "Heidi's." In fact, I unearthed the recipe years ago from an ancient edition of the Joy of Cooking. Best described as a date square with chocolate-pecan fudge filling in for the dates, these bars are chocolate heaven. They also keep well. So, when you first taste one of these bites of joy, thank Irma and Marion!

2-1/2 cups flour, sifted before measuring
 1 tsp baking soda
 1 tsp salt
 3 cups quick-cooking rolled oats

1 cup butter
 2 cups packed brown sugar
 2 eggs
 2 tsp vanilla
 12 oz bittersweet or semisweet chocolate, chopped
 1 can sweetened condensed milk (14 oz)
 2 Tbsp butter
 1/4 tsp salt
 2-3 cups chopped pecans or walnuts
 1 tsp vanilla

Preheat oven to 350°F. Butter a 10-by-15-inch jellyroll pan or cookie sheet with sides.

In a bowl, whisk together the flour, soda and salt. Stir in the oats.

In another bowl, cream together the 1 cup butter and brown sugar together until light and fluffy. Beat in eggs and 2 tsp of vanilla.

Over low heat, combine the chopped chocolate, sweetened condensed milk, 2 Tbsp butter and 1/4 tsp salt. Stir until melted. Remove from heat and stir in nuts and 1 tsp vanilla. Set aside.

Now combine the butter mixture with the flour-oat mixture, stirring with a wooden spoon until well mixed. Place two-thirds of this dough in the prepared pan, patting it out to a thin, even layer covering the whole bottom of the pan. Spread evenly with the chocolate mixture, making sure to cover all the dough. Crumble the remaining one-third dough over the chocolate, scattering it over the top like a crumble topping, but don't get too hung up about covering the surface evenly. There is supposed to be some gaps and unevenness in the topping.

Bake for 25-35 minutes, until golden-brown. Cool in pan before cutting into bars. Makes a lot of bars!

BROWN SUGAR SHORTBREAD

I have always loved these cookies as much or more than ordinary shortbread. Their crispy granular texture, full wheaty-caramel flavour and long keeping qualities turn these simple cookies into an outstanding variation on the traditional.

1-1/2 cups all-purpose flour, sifted before measuring
 1/2 cup whole wheat cake and pastry flour (available in bulk at health food stores)
 1/4 tsp salt
 1 cup unsalted butter
 2/3 cup best brown sugar
 1 tsp vanilla extract

Whisk together the flours and salt in a medium bowl.

Cream butter and sugar together in a large bowl until smooth, light and fluffy. Beat in the vanilla. Add the dry ingredients, stirring with a wooden spoon until well mixed.

At this point you can do various things with the dough. You can form it into the traditional disk, prick it with a fork and bake it. You can roll the dough out and cut it out with cookie cutters. Or, you can do it my favourite way: You can roll the dough into two 2-inch round logs, wrap in waxed paper and then refrigerate until firm. Slice the dough into 1/4-inch thick rounds and place on a cookie sheet.

Bake the cookies at 325°F until done. Makes about two dozen cookies.

MY MOTHER-IN-LAW'S ALMOND DELIGHTS

I begged this recipe off my mother-in-law the first year I spent Christmas at her house. I had never tasted such delightfully sweet, crispy, buttery, almond-perfumed cookies before.

This recipe makes quite a large batch (about 10 to 12 dozen), and they only keep about one week, but they freeze exceptionally well, and they are so delicious that even 12 dozen cookies will disappear in no time.

Another advantage to making this recipe is that you can divide the dough into three parts and make three different kinds of cookies (see instructions below). You can also roll the raw dough into logs, wrap and freeze them, and then slice off a dozen or so cookies to bake as the mood hits you.

Note: The Almond Delight recipe calls for almond paste, which is similar to marzipan but made with a higher proportion of almonds and less sugar. My favourite place to buy almond paste in Victoria is at the Dutch Bakery on Fort St. It is made on-site from imported specialty almonds. Be sure you specify that you want almond paste and not marzipan. You will need to buy two 8-oz logs to get the 12 oz called for in this recipe. Mix the remaining 4 oz with melted bittersweet chocolate and spread it on toast, pancakes or French toast!

2-1/4 cups sifted all-purpose flour
 1-1/2 cups sifted cake flour
 1 tsp salt

12 oz almond paste (not marzipan), available at its freshest from the Dutch Bakery on Fort Street

1-1/2 cups butter, softened
 1-1/2 cups superfine (berry) sugar
 2 whole eggs
 1 egg yolk
 2 tsp vanilla extract
 1/2 tsp almond extract

Sift together the flours and salt into a medium bowl.

Crumble the almond paste with your hands into a large bowl, eliminating as many lumps as possible. Add butter and beat together until thoroughly blended and smooth. Beat in the sugar until light and fluffy. Add eggs, yolk and extracts and beat again.

Add flour mixture, a third at a time, beating with a wooden spoon. Divide dough into 2 or 3 equal parts.

This dough is subject to infinite variations. You can stir in chopped dried cranberries or apricots or chocolate chips to make a sublime holiday drop cookie; you can leave the dough plain and form it into deliciously almond-perfumed crescents or rounds; you can make the world's best "jelly jewels" with this dough; you can use the dough as a crust for fabulous raspberry jam bars, etc. I usually pick two or three variations, depending on my mood. No matter what you decide to do with the dough, it must be refrigerated for at least 1 hour before shaping and baking. Here are instructions for three of my favourite Almond Delight variations. If you have divided the dough into thirds, each variation will make 3 to 4 dozen cookies.

All variations: The cookies keep well at room temperature for less than a week, but freeze very well for up to 2 months.

Holiday Drop Cookies: Combine 1 part dough with 2 cups of any of the following: chopped dried fruit (such as cranberries and apricots), roasted nuts or chocolate chips. Chill the dough for 1 hour. Drop by teaspoonfuls onto greased cookie sheets, leaving 2 inches around each cookie because the dough spreads quite a bit. Bake at 375°F for 10-12 minutes, or more, until fully cooked and golden brown. Let cool on wire racks.

Almond Crescents: Chill plain dough for at least 1 hour. Shape balls of dough (about 1-inch) into 3-inch long "logs," each about the thickness of a pencil. Form into crescents and place on a greased cookie sheet. Bake at 375°F for 9-12 minutes, until golden brown at edges. Hint: These taste better when they are a bit overcooked rather than undercooked.

Jelly Jewels: These are very fussy, but in my family, they are the first to disappear.

Chill plain dough for at least 1 hour. Meanwhile, spread about 1 to 1-1/2 cups hazelnuts on a baking sheet and toast in a 350°F oven for about 10 minutes, stirring the hazelnuts once or twice during toasting.

Remove the hazelnuts from the oven and immediately pour them into a large wire sieve that has been suspended over a large bowl. Use a clean dishcloth to press and rub the warm hazelnuts firmly against the sides of the sieve for a few minutes. This helps remove the nuts' bitter skins, and the bowl will collect a lot of the skin flakes that fall through the strainer. (By the way, you will never get rid of all the skins, or even most of the skins, so don't kill yourself trying to get completely skin-free hazelnuts). Carefully pour the rubbed hazelnuts into another bowl, making sure to leave the bulk of the skin flakes behind in the bottom of the sieve. When the nuts are cool, grind them finely in a food processor or nut grinder.

Roll the chilled dough into 3/4-inch balls, dip each one in beaten egg white and then roll each one in the toasted, ground hazelnuts. Place the balls on a cookie sheet and then put the filled sheet in the freezer for 20 minutes.

Remove the sheet from the freezer and put directly into a preheated 350°F oven. Bake for 8 minutes. Remove from oven and immediately press the tops of the cookies with a rounded half-teaspoon measure, or a melon baller. This should leave a little indent in the top of each cookie. Return to the oven and bake about 8 minutes more. Remove from oven and immediately re-press all the indents to help them keep their shape. Remove the cookies to wire racks to cool.

Store cookies in an airtight container, either at room temperature or in the freezer.

Just before serving, fill each indent with a half-teaspoon of flavourful homemade jelly (I especially love blackberry, but grape, crabapple, apricot or raspberry are all delicious.) Hint: If giving Jelly Jewels as a gift, keep the jelly separate, sealed in a little decorative glass jar. Include instructions on how to fill and serve the cookies.