

Christmas Cookies Part 2: More Holiday Traditions

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Educational Objectives

- Participants will learn about the basics of bar cookies.
- Participants will discover how to make easy and delicious creamy fudge.
- Participants will learn to make traditional shortbread.

Introduction

This second installment of the Christmas cookie lesson is a deeper dive into sweet seasonal traditions with three timeless treats: bar cookies, fudge, and shortbread. These classic confections have been passed down through generations, often tied to cherished memories of family gatherings, festive tins, and homemade gifts. While drop and rolled cookies are holiday staples, these styles bring a different kind of magic to the kitchen—less fuss, more flavor, and plenty of room for creativity.

Bar cookies are the workhorse of holiday baking. They are quick to prepare, easy to slice and share, and endlessly adaptable. Fudge brings the richness and nostalgia of old-fashioned candy-making, offering a melt-in-your-mouth reward for a few minutes of stirring and patience. Shortbread, with its simple, buttery perfection, has roots in Scottish holiday traditions.

This lesson explores the techniques behind each of these treats and shares our favorite recipes. Add new favorites to your holiday confection lineup to share with family and other CEOS club members!



Photo Credit: Ksenia Yakovleva

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Bar Cookies

Bar cookies are a time saver. The cookie dough is spread out in a pan, baked, and then cut into bars after baking. Most drop cookies can be made into bar cookies. The same rules apply: measure carefully, use quality ingredients, blend fat and sugar until light and fluffy, and carefully watch baking time and temperature.

Raspberry Almond Bards

Ingredients

- 1 cup flour
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup quick cooking oats
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup butter, room temperature
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup sugar
- $\frac{1}{3}$ teaspoon almond extract
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup red raspberry preserves
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup sliced almonds

Directions

- Preheat oven to 350 F. Line a 9-inch square baking pan with foil. Lightly grease foil.
- Mix flour, oats, and sugar in a bowl. Add almond extract. Cut in the butter with a pastry blender.
- Reserve 1 cup of the oat mixture. Press the remaining amount evenly in the pan.
- Spread preserves over top to about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch from the edge.
- Mix almonds with the reserved oat mixture. Sprinkle evenly over the preserves, then press down gently.
- Bake for 20 minutes or until edges are golden.
- Cool on a rack. Lift foil by the ends onto a cutting board and cut into bars. Store in an airtight container.

Tips for Making Traditional Fudge

Fudge should hold together without being too hard, while having a melty and silky feel in your mouth. Making traditional fudge is a complicated process, but there are ways to help when making older family favorite recipes.

- Use a heavy metal saucepan that distributes heat well.
- Brush the sides of the pan with a wet brush at the beginning of cooking to dissolve sugar crystals.
- Do not stir the mixture during cooking or the sugar could crystallize again. The mixture may seize and become grainy.
- Use a candy thermometer or conduct a cold-water test to check if the fudge is done. Do not rely on cooking time; the fudge is ready when a candy thermometer reads 234 to 237 F, or the mixture forms a soft ball in cold water.
- Let the mixture cool before beating. The temperature at this point should be 110 to 113 F. The fudge should be warm but not burning hot.
- Stop beating when the surface mixture starts to look dull. Pour immediately into a pan that has either been buttered or lined with parchment paper.

Easy Peanut Butter Fudge

This simple homemade fudge recipe takes only 15 minutes to prepare and uses 5 basic ingredients. The fudge is smooth, creamy, sweet, and packed with peanut butter flavor. Because of its high butter content, fudge is best stored in the refrigerator and is easier to cut into squares once thoroughly chilled. It can be served chilled, but for optimal creaminess, allow it to sit at room temperature for 30 minutes before serving. Use an 8-inch square pan, a 9-inch square pan or a rectangular pan with a similar volume.



Total time: 15 minutes, plus at least 2 hours chilling time

Yield: 50 pieces

Ingredients

- 1 cup unsalted butter, plus more for greasing the pan
- 1 cup smooth peanut butter (not natural peanut butter as it can separate)
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon Kosher salt (such as Diamond Kosher)
- 3 cups confectioner's sugar, sifted

Directions

- Grease an 8-inch square pan. Line the bottom with parchment paper, then grease the paper with butter.
- In a medium saucepan, combine the butter and peanut butter. Cook over medium-low heat, stirring often until melted and smooth, around 3 to 4 minutes. Do not let the mixture come to a simmer. Remove from heat, stir in the vanilla and salt.
- Scrape the peanut butter mixture into a large bowl. Gradually add the confectioner's sugar a few spoonfuls at a time, whisking until the sugar is fully incorporated after each addition. The mixture will stiffen and thicken as sugar is added. After all the sugar has been added, mix well with a rubber spatula until smooth.
- Transfer the mixture to the prepared pan and smooth the top. Cover with plastic wrap, pressing the plastic to the surface of the fudge. Chill for at least 2 hours, until set. Use a knife to cut the fudge away from the pan along the edges, then lift the parchment

paper to remove it. Cut into 1-inch squares. Store fudge in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 5 days or freeze for up to 2 months.

- To freeze, wrap individual pieces with parchment or wax paper. Wrap again with aluminum foil, then store in a resealable freezer bag. Another option is to wrap the whole sheet of fudge before slicing, wrapping as you would with individual pieces. Defrost fudge overnight in the refrigerator.

Scottish Shortbread

Originating in Scotland, shortbread is a type of cookie known for its buttery and crumbly texture. In Scotland, shortbread was reserved as a luxury for special occasions such as Christmas and Hogmanay (Scottish New Year's Eve). In the United Kingdom, it is called a "biscuit."

It became popular during the 12th century and was probably influenced by French pastry chefs during the Auld Alliance between France and Scotland. The refinement of shortbread is credited to Mary, Queen of Scots in the 16th century. A Scotswoman, Mrs. McLintock is credited with the first printed recipe in 1736. Similar "biscuits" are also popular in Denmark, Ireland, and Sweden.

It is called shortbread because of its crumbly texture due to the high fat content from butter, which inhibits the formation of long protein strands. Shortbread does not use a leavening agent, such as baking powder or soda. Buttery, golden, classic shortbread cookies are simple – 1 part white sugar, 2 parts butter, and 3 to 4 parts flour. Magic happens when butter, sugar, flour, and salt come together to make shortbread.



Classic Shortbread Recipe

Yield: 2-3 dozen medium cookies

Ingredients

- 1 pound cold, unsalted butter, sliced
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup powdered sugar
- $1 \frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- 4 cups unbleached all-purpose flour

Directions

- Cream the butter with a blender until smooth. Add sugar and salt, mix until fluffy.
- Add the flour 2 cups at a time. Mix until combined.
- Form a uniform ball and press into a thick disk. Wrap in plastic wrap and completely chill.
- Heat oven to 350 F.
- Roll the dough out $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick. Use a cookie cutter or knife to create cookies.
- Arrange cookies 1 inch apart on a parchment-lined baking sheet. Return cookies to the refrigerator for 15-30 minutes.
- Bake for 20 minutes, rotate pan and bake another 10 minutes, until cookies are golden on top. They should smell toasted.
- Remove from oven, allow to cool for 5 minutes, transfer to wire rack.

Secrets to Shortbread

- Salt focuses the flavor of the toasted butter, sugar, and flour. Use unsalted butter and accurately measure the salt added to the recipe.
- A thickness of $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch is just right. It allows for a golden crust with a crisp buttery edge and tender center.
- Pay attention while baking using sight and smell. Shortbread that is allowed to get super-golden and toasty has a much better flavor. It's the difference between butter and brown butter.
- Be sure all ingredients are fresh and good quality.
- To prevent spreading while baking, be sure the dough is well chilled.
- Simple shortbread is delicious, but flavorings, dried fruit, and/or nuts can be added as well.
- The dough can be frozen pre-rolled or pre-cut for several months in an airtight container. Thaw and bake according to the directions above.



Activity

To enhance this lesson:

- Demonstrate one of the recipes.
- Discuss family favorite bar cookie, fudge, and shortbread recipes.
- Invite members to bring their favorite cookie recipes. Those who don't bake can bring tea, coffee, or paper goods.

Resources

Classic Shortbread Cookies. Retrieved April 29, 2025 from <https://www.101cookbooks.com/classic-shortbread-cookies/>

Raspberry Almond Bars (May 1990) Woman's Day magazine.

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Blais, C. (2024). Secrets to Successful Fudge, Ricardo Cuisine. Retrieved May 1, 2025: <https://www.ricardocuisine.com/en/articles/food-chemistry/15-secrets-to-successful-fudge>

2025

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