

Christmas Cookies: History and Sharing of Baked Goods

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Educational Objectives

- Participants will learn the background of common holiday traditions.
- Participants will learn tips for successful cookie baking.
- Participants will discuss and share holiday heritage traditions.

A tradition well known during the Christmas holidays is the cookie tray. Cookies often have a central role in family and friend holiday traditions. A cookie tray can be found in homes throughout December as well as cookie swaps, gifts of cookies, cookies left out for “Santa” on Christmas Eve and accompanying holiday feast dessert tables.



Where does this tradition originate?

The traditions can be traced back to many influences, but the winter feast paired with burgeoning pastry tradition can be traced back to the medieval times in Europe when spices like nutmeg and cinnamon were just starting to be widely used as part of the sweets for a feast. Additionally, exotic fruits like citron, apricots and dates were being used and added to dessert plates. These items as well as sugar, lard and butter would have been considered prized ingredients. People would save them for special occasions, including large Christmas celebrations. Cookies, unlike pies or cakes, could be more easily shared with friends and neighbors through the month and thus the Christmas cookie tradition was born.

Cookies could be baked in advance and last a long-time pre-refrigeration, so they were popular to have for all the festivities and gifts throughout history.

Gingerbread

Gingerbread is a classic historical cookie (and cake) that was common and very popular – using many of the prized spices. Gingerbread can be traced around Europe, but Germany hosts “the gingerbread capital of

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the world” in Nuremberg. Although the spice mixture was popular, the gingerbread men created were attributed to Queen Elizabeth I who requested people-shaped cookies for the festivities.



“Cookie”

The word cookie was introduced to the United States in the late eighteenth century by Dutch immigrants and comes from the Dutch word koekje, a diminutive form of koek, ‘cake’. A cookie is a treat made from dough that includes flour, sugar, butter and eggs. Ingredients are added to change the flavor and consistency. The dough is usually shaped into small rounds and baked in an oven until golden brown. A traditional cookie is slightly crisp on the outside, while being chewy on the inside. This is different from short bread which doesn’t use eggs and is firm throughout.

Modern Cookies

In the 1950s, modern kitchen appliances made it possible for doughs to be chilled and ovens to bake at more precise temperatures. Thus, modern decorated Christmas cookies were achievable.

Successful Cookies!

There are a few tricks to baking the perfect cookie.

- Start with fresh, quality ingredients.
- Accurate measurement is important because baking is a science.
- Cream the butter (margarine/shortening) and

sugars together for three-five minutes to add air to help the butter get fluffy.

- Add eggs one at a time to the creamed mixture for better emulsion and a smooth cookie dough.
- Line the cookie tray with parchment paper so the bottoms will stay golden brown.
- Preheat oven and test for the correct oven temperature.
- Store cookies in an airtight container.

There are many types of cookies – drop, rolled, cut-out, filled, icebox and waffle. Below are a variety of recipes that represent these different dough or batter methods.

Variations with classic cookies like the Snickerdoodle add a special touch. In addition to rolling the dough balls in sugar and nutmeg, rum extract enhances the flavor.

Eggnog Snickerdoodle

Ingredients:

- 3½ cups flour
- 1½ teaspoons cream of tartar
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 cup unsalted butter, at room temperature
- 1¾ cups sugar, plus ¼ cup for rolling
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 large egg and 2 egg yolks, room temperature
- 1 tablespoon rum extract
- 2 teaspoons nutmeg (fresh if available)

Directions:

1. Combine flour, cream of tartar and baking soda.
2. Cream together butter, sugar and salt until smooth and fluffy.
3. Add the egg and egg yolks one at a time to the creamed mixture. Then add the rum extract and beat for 1-2 minutes.
4. Stir in the flour until evenly combined. Set aside to hydrate for 10 minutes..



5. Heat the oven to 350 degrees and line rimmed baking trays with parchment paper.
6. Combine the ¼ cup sugar with nutmeg.
7. Roll dough into balls, then roll in the sugar.
8. Place on baking sheet 2 inches apart. Bake 10-13 minutes until slightly puffed and just set.
9. Cool cookies slightly, then transfer to a wire rack to cool. Store in airtight container. These cookies are even better the next day!

A variety of ingredients can be added to the base cookie dough to make it unique. This “drop cookie” recipe uses coconut and Rice Krispies for a nice flavor and a crispy crunch.

Cracker Jack Cookies

Ingredients:

- 1 cup of butter or margarine
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1 cup white sugar
- 2 eggs
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 1½ cups flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 2 cups oatmeal
- 1 cup coconut
- 2 cups Rice Krispies

Directions:

1. Cream butter and sugar until well blended. Blend in eggs and vanilla.
2. In a separate bowl combine the flour, baking powder and oatmeal. Gradually add to the creamed mixture.
3. Stir in coconut and Rice Krispies until just combined.
4. Spoon by tablespoon onto a baking tray.
5. Bake at 350 degrees for 10 minutes.
6. Immediately sprinkle with red and green sugar.

Recipe from Dorothy Harper, Durgon CEOS Club, Hardy County.

Spices give cookies a distinct flavor. This spicy fragrant cookie is a slice and bake “ice box” cookie. This cookie holds well can be made following Thanksgiving and served at Christmas. It is perfect for dipping in tea or coffee.

Scotch Cookies

Ingredients:

- ¾ cup shortening
- 2 cups brown sugar
- 2 eggs
- 3 cups flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1½ teaspoons cloves
- 1½ teaspoons All Spice
- 1½ teaspoons cinnamon



Directions:

1. Cream butter and sugar until well blended. Blend in eggs.
2. In a separate bowl combine the flour, baking powder and spices. Add to the creamed mixture.
3. Shape dough into 4 dough logs, cover and chill.
4. Slice the cookies and place on a baking tray.
5. Bake at 375 degrees for 10 minutes.
6. Immediately sprinkle with red and green sugar.

Recipe from Betty Williams.

Cool and store in an airtight container. This dough can be chilled for up to three days before baking.

Pizzelles are Italian waffle cookies made by cooking batter between two hot irons. They can be hard and crisp or soft and chewy depending on the ingredients and preparation.



Pizzelles

Ingredients:

- 3 large eggs
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup white sugar
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup butter, melted
- 1 tablespoon vanilla (or Anise)
- $1\frac{3}{4}$ cups flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 2 teaspoons vegetable oil, or as needed.

Directions:

1. Beat eggs and sugar until thick.
2. Stir in melted butter and vanilla.
3. Sift together flour and baking powder. Blend into the batter until smooth.
4. Heat the pizzelle iron and brush with oil.
5. Drop batter by one tablespoon onto the hot iron.
6. Bake for 20-45 seconds or until steam is no longer coming out of the iron.
7. Carefully remove cookies from the iron. Repeat with remaining batter.
8. Cool completely before storing in air-tight container.

Try it!

Host a CEOS Club cookie swap! Members sign up for a different cookie and everyone leaves with an assorted tray.

Organize a larger swap at the community level through your church or even the county CEOS level. The more, the merrier when it comes to cookies.

Attempt a new cookie recipe. While we all have classics that we love, you may find a new favorite!

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Share Your Family Cookie Tradition

Each person describes their favorite family cookie tradition or recipe. Talk about who baked the cookies and where the recipe originated.

Resources

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