Cooking Corner: Holiday cookies are sweet tidings of comfort and joy

by Lori Weisberg

I have a confession. I'm a cookie snob - but for good reason.

Each holiday season, I take time off from work and retreat to my kitchen, where I produce logs and mounds and slabs of cookie dough in preparation for a mega baking session that will yield carefully packaged gifts for friends, family and co-workers.

HOLIDAY COOKING - Holiday cookies are a sweet treat that provides comfort and joy. CNS Photo. By the time I'm done, I'll have made a dozen varieties, all assembled in bulging, beribboned cellophane bags ready for delivery.

So when I'm invited to holiday cookie exchanges, I usually politely decline, preferring to selfishly hold onto my own confections, prepared from recipes culled from years of research and far too many calorie-laden tastings.

The recipes I've chosen to share reflect my personal taste of what makes a cookie appealing. Certainly, there are concoctions far more gourmet and swanky than these, but my favorites please because of their simplicity, appealing ingredients and tantalizing textures.

Personally, I prefer crispy cookies over soft and chewy, which is why I adore the Crispy Oatmeal Cookies, which spread to golden, crunchy disks once fully baked.

Similarly crisp in texture and always a crowd pleaser are the tender Cornmeal-Pecan Biscuits. They're definitely labor-intensive, what with all the shaping and layering of the rectangles of dough, but the crunchy biscuits, redolent of toasted pecans and cinnamon, can be addictive.

I'm a pushover for any kind of buttery shortbread or a sugar-encrusted sable cookie - the key ingredient, being, of course, plenty of unsalted butter. You get the best of both worlds with Chocolate Swirled Shortbread, a combo of vanilla and rich chocolate emboldened by espresso powder.

Probably the most decadent of these Top 5 choices are the Chocolate Crackles. Coated in granulated and powdered sugar, they're sort of a cross between a chocolate molten cake and fudgy brownie. As the cookie bakes, you'll see a crackly pattern emerge on the surface, which makes for a showy presentation.

Baking, which can be a relaxing pursuit during the stressful holiday season, always reminds me of my grandmother, a prodigious baker who nourished my passion for culinary pursuits. Her Snowballs, aptly named for their cloak of powdered sugar, are the most tender, nutty version of this popular ethnic cookie that I've encountered.

If you're interested in making cookies as a gift, prepare and freeze the dough ahead of time. A day or two before you plan to give them out, start doing your baking so the cookies remain fresh. I've experimented with different ways to package the cookies, but I find an easy, attractive solution is to use holiday-themed cellophane bags, tied with raffia or curling ribbon. Attach a homemade label with the names of the cookies you've made.

A fancier, although costlier, alternative is to use small bakery-style boxes lined with colorful waxed tissue that you can secure with decorative ribbon.

No matter how simple or flashy the packaging, the sweets inside are what really matter. Be forewarned, though. After you try out these recipes, your friends and family may demand that you make this an annual tradition.

CORNMEAL-PECAN BISCUITS

1/2 cup whole pecans

8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter

1 cup sugar

1 large egg

1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour

1/2 cup yellow cornmeal

1 teaspoon baking powder

1/4 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

2 tablespoons packed dark-brown sugar

1 large egg white, lightly beaten with 1 tablespoon water

Yields 2 1/2 dozen cookies.

Preheat oven to 400 F. Place pecans on baking sheet. Toast in oven until golden and fragrant, 8 to 10 minutes. Let pecans cool.

In bowl of electric mixer fitted with paddle attachment, cream butter and sugar on medium speed until light and fluffy, 2 to 4 minutes. Add egg and vanilla; incorporate.

In medium bowl, whisk together flour, cornmeal, baking powder and salt. On low speed, add flour mixture to butter mixture. Mix until combined, about 30 seconds.

Transfer dough to clean work surface, and divide into 4 equal portions. Place 1 portion between two 12-inch square pieces of parchment. Roll out dough to a 3 1/2x9-inch rectangle. Repeat with remaining 3 portions of dough. Transfer to baking sheets; chill at least 10 minutes.

In food processor bowl, process pecans, cinnamon and brown sugar until nuts have been finely chopped, 12 to 15 seconds. Transfer mixture to medium bowl.

Remove top pieces of parchment from dough. Brush one lightly with egg white; sprinkle 1/4 cup pecan mixture over top. Brush second rectangle lightly with egg wash. Invert second rectangle over first; remove parchment on top. Repeat layering process, leaving top rectangle uncoated. Trim to a 3 1/4x8 1/2-inch brick. Wrap; chill overnight.

Preheat oven to 350 F. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment. Cut brick into 1/4-inch slices; place slices on baking sheets, spaced 2 1/2 inches apart. Bake biscuits until light golden, 12 to 15 minutes. Transfer to wire rack to cool. Bake or freeze remaining dough. Store in an airtight container up to 2 weeks.

- Martha Stewart Holiday Cookies, 2001.

CRISPY OATMEAL COOKIES

3/4 pound (3 sticks) unsalted butter

1 cup light brown sugar

1 1/8 cup granulated sugar

1 large egg

1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract

3 cups rolled oats (not instant)

1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour

3/4 teaspoon kosher salt

2 1/2 teaspoons baking soda

1 1/2 cups raisins or chopped walnuts

Yields 48 cookies.

Preheat oven to 350 F. In mixer, cream butter until fluffy. Add sugars, and cream together until light and fluffy. Add egg and vanilla, and mix well.

In medium bowl, stir together oats, flour, salt and baking soda. Mixing, slowly add the oat mixture to the butter mixture, and mix just until combined. Add raisins or walnuts and mix just until combined.

Drop by tablespoonfuls onto baking sheets, leaving at least 2 inches between cookies. Bake until browned and crispy around the edges, about 8 to 10 minutes. Let cool on wire racks and store in airtight container.

- From "American Brasserie" by Gale Gand, Rick Tramonto and Julia Moskin (Wiley, $32.50).

CHOCOLATE CRACKLES

8 ounces bittersweet chocolate, finely chopped

1 1/4 cups all-purpose flour

1/2 cup unsweetened Dutch-process cocoa powder

2 teaspoons baking powder

1/4 teaspoon coarse salt

1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, softened

1 1/2 cups packed light brown sugar

2 large eggs

1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

1/3 cup whole milk

1 cup granulated sugar

1 cup confectioners' sugar

Yields 5 dozen.

Preheat oven to 350 F.

Melt chocolate in heatproof bowl set over pan of simmering water, stirring. Set aside, and let cool.

In medium bowl, sift together flour, cocoa powder, baking powder and salt; set aside.

Mix butter and brown sugar on medium speed until pale and fluffy, 2 to 3 minutes. Mix in eggs and vanilla, and then melted chocolate. Reduce speed to low; mix in flour mixture in 2 batches, alternating with milk. Divide dough into 4 equal pieces. Wrap each in plastic wrap; refrigerate until firm, about 2 hours.

Divide each piece into 16 (1-inch) balls. Roll in granulated sugar to coat, then in confectioners' sugar to coat. Space 2 inches apart on baking sheets lined with parchment paper. Bake until surfaces crack, about 14 minutes. Let cool on sheets on wire racks.

Cookies can be stored between layers of parchment in airtight containers up to 3 days.

- Martha Stewart Holiday Cookies, December 2006.

CHOCOLATE-SWIRLED SHORTBREAD

Vanilla shortbread:

2 cups all-purpose flour

1/2 cup sugar

Pinch of salt

16 tablespoons (2 sticks) cold unsalted butter, cut into chunks

1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

Chocolate shortbread:

4 ounces semisweet chocolate, chopped

1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour

1/2 cup powdered sugar

1 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder

1/8 teaspoon salt

12 tablespoons (1 1/2 sticks) unsalted butter, softened

1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract combined with 2 tablespoons instant coffee crystals (optional)

Yields 2 dozen cookies.

Preheat oven to 325 F. Line cookie sheet with baking parchment.

To make vanilla shortbread: In large bowl, whisk together flour, sugar and salt. With pastry cutter, cut butter into dry ingredients until it is evenly distributed and size of small crumbs. Stir in vanilla and mix dough,

shaping it with your hands until it comes together to form a ball.

Transfer dough to lightly floured work surface and roll it out to 1/4 inch thick. Cover with plastic wrap and set aside.

To make chocolate shortbread: In ceramic or glass bowl covered with plastic wrap, heat chocolate in microwave oven on High for 30-second intervals, stirring after each interval, until smooth. Let cool to lukewarm.

In bowl, whisk together flour, sugar, cocoa, and salt. Put butter in bowl and whip until light and fluffy using electric mixer set on medium speed. Add melted chocolate and beat until smooth. Beat in vanilla and instant coffee, if using. Add dry ingredients and combine until dough forms. Gather dough into a disk and flatten slightly. On lightly floured surface, roll it out until 1/4 inch thick. (Should the dough be too soft to roll, wrap it in plastic wrap and chill until firm.)

Place chocolate dough on top of vanilla dough and with your hands gently but firmly roll the doughs into a log. Wrap log in plastic wrap and chill for about 1 hour, or until firm.

With sharp knife, cut chilled dough into slices 1/2 inch thick and arrange them on prepared cookie sheet, leaving 1 inch between.

Bake for about 20 minutes, or until golden around edges. Remove cookies with a spatula to wire racks to cool. Store in sealed container. The cookies can also be frozen, wrapped first in plastic wrap and then in aluminum foil.

- "Great American Desserts" by Debbi Fields (Simon & Schuster, $16.50).

SNOWBALLS

1 pound unsalted butter

1 cup powdered sugar, plus more for coating cookies

4 1/2 cups unsifted all-purpose flour

1/2 teaspoon baking powder

1/2 teaspoon salt

2 cups chopped nuts

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Yields 60 to 70 cookies.

Preheat oven to 300 F.

In bowl of electric mixer, cream together butter and sugar. Sift 3 cups of flour with baking powder and salt and add to butter mixture. Add remaining 1 1/2 cups flour to nuts and add to butter-flour mixture. Add vanilla extract and mix in.

Roll into balls size of walnuts and place on baking sheets. Bake in oven for 20 to 22 minutes. Immediately drop each cookie into a bowl of powdered sugar to coat it.

- Inez Korsen.

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