

Ship-Shape Christmas Cookies

These baking, storing, and shipping tips guarantee great-looking, great-tasting holiday gifts

TEXT BY JOANNE McALLISTER SMART
RECIPES BY MARGERY K. FRIEDMAN

Every year after his office holiday party, my father would bring home a box of Christmas cookies made by his secretary, Jean. Though the cookies *looked* different—some were dark, some light, some dipped in chocolate, others filled with jam—they all tasted alike, their distinct characteristics lost in a mingling of flavors. Jean's mistake wasn't that she didn't know how to bake cookies, but that she didn't know how to pack them so that they would taste their best.

Like Jean, you might make cookies to send to friends and family or to hand deliver as hostess gifts. If you do, review the following baking and packing tips before you begin. They'll not only help you bake great-looking, great-tasting cookies, but they'll also ensure that what arrives resembles what you've sent.

The recipes beginning on p. 34 have many ingredients in common, which will help keep your cookie-baking session running smoothly. Yet the cookies' flavors—rich butter, zingy ginger, and delicate lime—

are deliciously different. Just be sure to pack them so they stay that way.

CONTROLLING SHAPE AND COLOR WITH THE RIGHT PAN AND INGREDIENTS

Problems with shape and color usually happen during baking, but there are ways to prevent such problems before the first batch is baked.

The pan and its position in the oven affect color. Bake cookies on a flat, aluminum baking sheet;

Practical yet pretty packing—wrap each kind of cookie separately to keep flavors distinct.

high sides deflect heat, making the cookies bake unevenly. For most even coloring, bake one sheet at a time. If that isn't practical, stagger two sheets on two oven racks and switch their positions halfway through baking.

Don't let the cookies spread and "kiss." Give your cookies plenty of room on the baking sheet so they can spread without touching. To keep cookies from spreading too much, don't drop the dough onto a hot baking sheet, and don't grease the baking sheet unless a recipe specifically calls for it. If your cookies persist in spreading, try replacing some of the butter with shortening, which doesn't melt as quickly. You can also switch to a high-protein flour, which absorbs more liquid and makes the dough less inclined to spread.

Protein also affects a cookie's color. For a darker cookie, add more protein, like an egg or high-protein flour. For a lighter cookie, cut back on the protein.

TIPS FOR SHIPPING COOKIES

There are a few things to keep in mind when you ship cookies to ensure that they arrive in one piece, tasting fresh and looking good.

Wrap varieties separately to keep flavors from mingling.

Wrap the cookies in

manageable-sized sleeves, and then surround the sleeves in bubble wrap for best cushioning.

Don't mix soft and crisp cookies in the same package; the crisp cookies absorb moisture from the soft cookies and become soft themselves.

Use tins, not boxes, to ship cookies. Don't overstuff your tin with cookies. Fill empty spaces with plastic wrap or with holiday tissue or wrapping paper. Though it may sound like overkill, put the tin in a box and pad it with crumpled newspaper or wrapping paper. Finally, try to ship by two-day delivery, so the cookies arrive fresh.



Basic Butter Cookie Dough

This dough works great for a marathon cookie-baking session because it allows for variations of shape and flavor. *Yields about 6 dozen 2-inch cookies.*

8 oz. (16 Tbs.) *unsalted butter, softened*
4½ oz. (1 cup) *confectioners' sugar, sifted after measuring*
1 tsp. *vanilla extract*
¼ tsp. *almond extract*
10½ oz. (2½ cups) *all-purpose flour*
½ tsp. *salt*

Cream the butter and sugar together with a mixer or a wooden spoon until well blended. Add the vanilla and almond extracts. Sift the flour with the salt; gradually add the flour to the butter mixture until you have a firm but silky dough that does not stick to your hands. If necessary, add more flour a little at a time until you've reached the



right consistency. Chill the dough for at least an hour before rolling and shaping.

Heat the oven to 350°F. Divide the dough in half. Roll each piece between sheets of waxed paper to about ¼ inch thick. Lightly dust the dough with flour. If the dough becomes sticky, chill it for about 10 min. Press the dough with cookie cutters. (If mailing, keep the shapes simple.) Reroll the scraps and cut more shapes. Repeat the process with the second half of the dough.

Bake the cookies until they turn light brown, 10 to 12 min. Remove from the baking sheet immediately and cool on a wire rack. When completely cooled, decorate with royal icing (recipe opposite) or other decorations, if desired.

For sandwich cookies—Make the dough as directed but roll it to about ⅛ inch thick. Press cookies with a 2-inch circular cutter. Using a smaller cookie cutter of the same or a different shape, cut holes in half of the 2-inch circles. (Use scraps from the holes to make a few more cookies.) Bake as directed above. When the cookies are cool, spread about 1 tsp. ganache (recipe opposite) or fruit preserves on one side of a whole cookie. Press on a cookie with a cut-out center. Repeat with the rest of the cookies. Yields about 30 sandwich cookies.

For bar cookies—Shape dough into a brick about 3 inches wide, 9½ inches long, and ¼ inch thick. Chill the dough for at least an hour. Cut the brick into ¼-inch



slices. Bake in a 350°F oven until golden brown, about 12 to 15 min. Yields about 40 cookies.

VARIATIONS ON THE BASIC BUTTER COOKIE DOUGH:

- ◆ For a nutty flavor, omit the almond extract and add 1 cup of toasted chopped hazelnuts to the dough.
- ◆ For a cardamom-flavored cookie, omit the almond extract and add ½ tsp. ground cardamom to the dough. This tastes great paired with orange marmalade in a cookie sandwich (as described at left).

Ganache

Yields 1 cup, enough for 30 two-inch sandwich cookies.

- ½ cup heavy cream
- 6 oz. bittersweet chocolate, chopped fine (1 cup)

Bring the cream to a full boil, transfer it to a bowl, and cool for a minute. Pour the chocolate onto the hot cream and mix with a rubber spatula until the chocolate is melted. The ganache will thicken to a spreading consistency as it cools.

Royal Icing

Because it becomes quite stiff, this icing works well on cookies that are to be shipped. *Yields ½ cup.*

- 1 large egg white
- ¼ tsp. cream of tartar
- 4½ oz. (1 cup) confectioners' sugar, sifted after measuring

Beat the egg white until frothy. Add the cream of tartar and the confectioners' sugar, a little at a time, beating until the mixture forms soft peaks. The icing dries quickly, so keep it covered with a wet cloth until ready to use; it will hold about 12 hours covered this way. Pipe the icing on the cookies using various small pastry tubes. For a coffee-flavored variation, add ¼ tsp. instant espresso.

Triple-Ginger Cookies

Ginger in three forms adds a warm zing to this variation on the traditional spice cookie. *Yields about 4½ dozen cookies.*

- 5½ oz. (11 Tbs.) unsalted butter, softened
- 1 cup molasses
- ⅔ cup sugar
- 1 egg
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 18 oz. (4 cups) all-purpose flour

- 1 tsp. baking soda
- ½ tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. ground ginger
- 2 Tbs. finely chopped crystallized ginger
- 2 Tbs. finely chopped fresh ginger
- Confectioners' sugar for dusting (optional)

Cream the butter and molasses with a mixer or a wooden spoon until well blended. Add the sugar and mix until well blended. Add the egg and vanilla extract and beat until well incorporated. Sift together the flour, baking soda, and salt. Mix the ground, crystallized, and fresh ginger into the dry ingredients. Stir the dry mixture into the butter mixture in three batches until just blended.

Heat the oven to 350°F. Roll the dough in 1 Tbs. chunks into 1-inch balls. Arrange the balls 1 inch apart on ungreased baking sheets. Bake until the cookies crack slightly on top but are still moist inside, about 13 min. Cool on racks; sprinkle with confectioners' sugar.

Lime Zest Wafers

These somewhat delicate cookies hold up well during travel due to their uniform size: just pack them in a sleeve and surround that with bubble wrap. *Yields about 100 cookies.*

- 8 oz. (16 Tbs.) unsalted butter, softened
- 1 cup sugar
- ½ tsp. vanilla extract
- 4 egg whites at room temperature
- 4½ oz. (1 cup) all-purpose flour, sifted after measuring
- ⅛ tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. finely grated lime zest

Cream the butter and sugar with a mixer or a wooden spoon until well blended. Add the vanilla extract. Mix in the egg whites just until incorporated. Gradually add the flour and salt and mix just until absorbed. Stir in the lime zest.

Heat the oven to 350°F. Spray baking sheets with vegetable spray or lightly brush them with vegetable oil. Use a ½ tsp. measure to drop the batter onto the baking sheets. Leave a few inches between cookies because they spread. Bake until the edges are lightly browned, about 10 min. Remove the cookies immediately from the baking sheet and cool on a rack. (If the wafers become brittle before you have removed them from the baking sheet, slide the sheet into the oven for 30 seconds to soften them.)

Joanne McAllister Smart is an associate editor for Fine Cooking. Margery K. Friedman specializes in making custom wedding cakes in Rockville, Maryland, but she also loves to bake cookies. ◆

All these cookies can be frozen. Wrap them well and freeze them while they're still fresh but not hot from the oven. Ice the cookies after defrosting.