

Macaroons

Simple ingredients make a classic cookie

BY JANE SPECTOR DAVIS

I have been happily baking and eating macaroons for many years, but only recently did I realize that within this tiny cookie lie centuries of history and tradition. The basic recipe for this delicate confection, based on almond, egg white, and sugar, has survived thousands of miles as it left its original home in Spain and travelled around the world. While the macaroon is fascinating in terms of history, you can enjoy making macaroons for more practical reasons—they're quick to make, they can

be made days or even weeks ahead of time, and, of course, they're delicious.

A CULINARY TREK

Long before Columbus, bakers in Spain were making confections from the almonds that grew abundantly in the country's sunny climate. Still today, there are convents in Spain legendary for their handmade almond macaroons. In the famous year of 1492, Spanish Jews fleeing the Inquisition settled in other countries



Almond Pistachio Macaroons have a long and illustrious history. Delicious results depend on the right ingredients, careful measurements, and a close eye on the oven.

Photos: Martha Holmberg



Hallmarks of a good macaroon—light and crisp exterior, moist and chewy interior.

around the Mediterranean—to Italy, Greece, Turkey, and many Arab countries (the Jews enjoyed excellent relations with the Moors when they ruled Spain).

The Spanish (Sephardic) Jews took their favorite recipes with them, and as almonds had been growing in these other regions since Biblical times, they were able to continue their traditions of almond confectionery, while adapting their recipes to local ingredients. The macaroon soon acquired names in the languages of its new homes—*macarone* in Italian, *maruchino* in Turkish, *hagdi badam* in Arabic. As well as new names, new flavors were introduced to the basic recipe, such as the rosewater and pistachio nuts in my recipe, which are used in Arab cuisine.

In America, almonds flourish in the California sun. Their ready availability and reasonable cost make them a staple ingredient in today's fine baking, whether in recipes brought by immigrants or in those developed on American soil.

REDISCOVERING THE HANDMADE MACAROO

Through the centuries, the macaroon remained a favorite of Jewish holiday cuisine, with a starring role at Passover, when all foods must be flourless. Today, most Passover macaroons in America are commercially made with coconut in a variety of flavors, though vanilla and chocolate predominate.

French pastry chefs include *meringues aux amandes* (almond meringues) among their beautifully made *petits gâteaux* (cookies), and Italian pastry shops offer a selection of macaroons, from the soft and chewy *riciarelli* of Siena to fragrant and crunchy *amaretti di Saronno*.

Unfortunately, this emphasis on professionally made macaroons meant that home cooks thought all macaroons came from either a tin or a fine pastry shop, and so many have lost touch with the tradition of baking macaroons at home. I think it's time to reverse this trend and to begin a new tradition for

this wonderful cookie, which deserves a place year-round among the home baker's favorite recipes, especially now that so many of us are looking for healthier dessert recipes. Nut oils are mostly mono-unsaturated. A study published in the March 1993 issue of *The New England Journal of Medicine* states that nut oils show promise in helping to lower cholesterol, especially almond and walnut oils. Egg whites are, of course, fat-free. Our ancestors may not have been as aware as we are of these nutritional benefits, but they knew that macaroons were a treat worth preserving for generations.

The challenge in making a macaroon lies in its simplicity: when there are few ingredients, each one becomes very important, and there is little room for error. When the challenge is met, the reward is an exquisite taste and delicate texture, crunchy on the outside and soft and moist on the inside.

PREPARING THE RIGHT INGREDIENTS

The ingredients for macaroons are inexpensive and easy to obtain, but each one must be understood and handled properly in order to get the desired results.

Almond paste is a dense, sweet paste of commercially ground almonds, sugar, and almond flavor. It's available in small cans or tubes in most supermarkets or specialty food stores, and it keeps well for months. The flavor of almond paste can't be duplicated at home because true almond paste contains oil of bitter almonds. Bitter almonds and apricot pits contain a toxic chemical that must be neutralized by commercial processing. The FDA prohibits the import or sale of bitter almonds to consumers. You can grind almonds and sugar yourself, but the taste won't be the same as almond paste. Note that marzipan is not the same thing as almond paste, though the two products share the same ingredients. Marzipan is made to be sweeter (and sometimes contains corn syrup) and has a slightly grainier texture.

Sugars—I use granulated sugar and sifted confectioners' sugar in this recipe. The granulated sugar's molecular makeup helps give the cookies crunch and also helps to blend and aerate the almond paste. The sugar crystals have sharp edges that act like tiny knives, cutting into the almond paste and drawing in air at the same time. The confectioners' sugar gives additional sweetness while keeping the interior of the cookie tender—using all granulated sugar would make the cookie too crisp. Confectioners' sugar also contains a small amount of cornstarch, which helps bind the batter.

Egg whites—To avoid any risk of salmonella contamination, when handling raw eggs, be sure to clean your counters, hands, and tools before moving on to the next ingredient. Laying a sheet of wax paper on the counter when working with the eggs makes clean-up easy—just bundle up the paper, egg shells, and any drips and discard.

Egg whites become looser and better able to incorporate air when they're warmed to room temperature. That's why when egg whites are beaten alone to be used as leavening in cakes and soufflés, they should be at room temperature. In macaroons, the egg whites are used for their binding properties and only secondarily as leavening, but they should still be left at room temperature for about 30 minutes.

Flavorings—Here's where you can have fun. My recipe calls for rosewater, which is used in Mediterranean countries and is available in fine grocery stores, specialty food stores, or Middle Eastern stores. Yes, it's made from roses, and it gives a lovely scent to your macaroons. But you can also use a fine vanilla extract, or an almond liqueur like Amaretto,

or a dark coffee. I don't recommend using almond extract for flavoring because I think it has an artificial, cloying taste.

Nuts—In keeping with the Mediterranean theme, this recipe calls for unsalted (and undyed) pistachios, another nut from the ancient Middle East that's now at home in California. The natural green color is delightful in almond macaroons. I like to chop them so there are some big chunks as well as fine bits; the uneven texture adds to the handmade appeal. You can substitute chopped unblanched almonds for the pistachios—I think the skin gives a bit of lovely almond brown and adds more flavor than if blanched almonds were used. Pine nuts are good, too.

BAKING TIPS

Macaroons will train your eyes to watch for subtle color and texture changes. Every good baker loves a challenge, so here are a few notes to get you started.

Measuring by weight—Baking is chemistry: each ingredient has specific characteristics that perform different functions, beyond the simple function of providing flavor. For instance, eggs leaven by trapping air; they carry flavor and create tenderness because of the fat in the yolks; and they bind because of the properties of the whites. It's crucial, therefore, that all ingredients combine in the right proportion. Dry ingredients, such as the sugars, nuts, and almond paste in my recipe, along with flour, chopped fruit, and chocolate, can be measured more accurately by weight (on a scale) than by volume (using a measuring cup).

Flourless baking—Without the binding properties of the gluten that is found in wheat flour, flour-



Measuring by weight is more accurate than measuring by volume, so the author uses an electronic scale; the digital display is mounted on the wall.



A properly cooked macaroon will pull away easily from the parchment when cool. Its underside will be an even light brown.



Davis pinches the batter after mixing in the confectioners' sugar—when ingredients hold together, it's time to add egg whites.



The right consistency. The batter is fine-textured, light in color, and almost fluffy after the final phase of beating.



Shaping the cookies. A small ice-cream scoop is ideal for shaping, making it easy to release the sticky batter and ensuring uniformity of shape.

less baked goods are fragile and should be handled with care. On the positive side, they have unmatched intensity of flavor, because there's no wheat batter to dilute the taste. Flourless macaroons will stay fresher longer than cookies made with flour. When stored in a tin or wrapped in plastic, they will remain unspoiled for weeks, with just a gradual shift in textures—more crispy and less chewy.

Creaming almond paste and sugar—It's crucial to blend these two ingredients (and subsequently the egg whites) correctly. The almond paste is very dense, and so you'll need to use a heavy-duty mixer, such as a KitchenAid, with a paddle. Don't try to make this in a food processor—you'll burn out the motor. Trust me, I found out the hard way!

Testing for doneness—When completely cool, the ideal macaroon will have a crunchy, slightly cracked meringue-like shell and a moist and chewy center. While the cookie is still hot, however, the outside will seem soft. It's critical to learn to recognize the point at which the cookie makes the transition from too soft and wet to perfectly cooked. The properly cooked macaroon will look slightly puffy. When gently squeezed or pressed, it will be soft, yet you'll feel that it has "set up" and is not flabby or mushy. When lifted, it will pull away from the parchment paper without sticking. The underside will be an even light brown.

ALMOND-PISTACHIO MACAROONS

The technique of combining almond paste and sugar is the same as for creaming butter and sugar, but almond paste is heavier than butter, so you must beat longer. *Makes 32 macaroons.*

18 oz. (2 cups) almond paste
7 oz. (1 cup) granulated white sugar
7 oz. (2 cups) sifted confectioners' sugar
½ cup (3 to 4 large) egg whites
2 tsp. rosewater, vanilla extract, or liqueur
⅛ tsp. salt
4 oz. (1 cup) unsalted, undyed chopped pistachios

Mixing the batter—Divide the almond paste into pieces (about ¼ cup each) and put them in the bowl of a heavy-duty mixer fitted with a paddle. (Don't use a food processor; the batter is too heavy.) Add the granulated sugar. Quickly turn mixer on and off a few times to draw the sugar into the mixture so it doesn't fly out of the bowl. Work on a low speed until the mixture forms coarse, even crumbs. Don't allow the mixture to go beyond this point to a paste, because it will be difficult to incorporate the confectioners' sugar. Turn off the mixer and add the confectioners' sugar. Mix on a low speed for 1 min. and a medium speed for 1 to 2 min. until the mixture is very smooth and begins to compact itself around the sides of the bowl or when pinched. Scrape the sides and bottom of the bowl.

Adding whites and flavorings—Add the egg whites, rosewater, and salt. Mix on a medium speed until combined, but still moist and tacky. Scrape down the sides and bottom of the bowl and paddle. Turn the mixer to a medium-high speed for 2 min. or longer, until the mixture is light in texture and almost white in color. Reduce to a low speed, add half the pistachios, and mix until combined.

Shaping—Heat the oven to 325°F. Line 2 or 3 good-quality cookie sheets with bakers' parchment. Use a #40 (1½-in.) ice-cream scoop to shape the macaroons. No scoop? Use a heaping tablespoon. (You could also use a pastry bag, but only if you have very strong hands.) Place scoops of batter on the prepared cookie sheets, leaving room between each one. Sprinkle each macaroon with pistachios, and press down slightly so that the nuts stick. Some will fall off, but you can save them after baking and use them for the next batch, or have a toasted pistachio treat.

Baking and cooling—Bake the macaroons for 25 to 28 min. They should be puffed and light and still feel a little soft but not wet. The bottoms will be very light brown, not dark. Put the cookie sheets on a rack and let the macaroons cool completely before moving. Carefully peel the cookies from the parchment and store them at room temperature in an airtight container.

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