

COOKIE SEASON

Now, more than ever, we need sweets

By Daniel Neman | Tribune News Service

It has been an unusual year. Perhaps you have noticed. But even so, people are finding ways to keep up the Christmas cookie tradition.

One reader wrote to say that her annual cookie exchange party is still going on this year, but virtually (“with real live cookies”). She has worked out a plan by which her friends bake cookies, put them in plastic bags for each person, drops those bags off in a plastic box at the host’s house, and the host then collates all the cookies and delivers them to each of the guests.

Yes, it’s a lot of work. But it’s cookies. Cookies are worth any amount of trouble.



Chocolate-Dipped Orange Shortbread. [HILLARY LEVIN/ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH/TNS]

Chocolate-Dipped Orange Shortbread

Yield: About 50 cookies

- 3 cups all-purpose flour, plus more for rolling and cutting out the dough
- 1½ teaspoons baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ½ pound (2 sticks) salted butter, room temperature
- 1 cup firmly packed dark brown sugar
- 1 large egg
- Grated zest of 1 orange
- 3 tablespoons fresh orange juice
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 6 ounces semisweet chocolate, coarsely chopped

To make the shortbread, in a medium bowl whisk together the flour, baking powder and salt. In a large bowl, beat the butter and brown sugar with an electric mixer set on medium-high speed until combined, about 1 minute. Beat in the egg, followed by the orange zest, orange juice and vanilla. With the mixer on low speed, mix in the flour mixture just until combined.

Divide the dough in half and shape each half into a thick disk. Wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate until chilled, about 2 hours, or up to 2 days (if it is too firm to roll out, let stand at room temperature for 15 to 30 minutes to slightly soften).

Position the oven racks in the top third and center of the oven and preheat to 325 degrees. Line 2 large rimmed baking sheets with parchment paper or silicone baking mats.

Working with 1 disk at a time, briefly knead the dough on a lightly floured work surface until smooth. Roll out the dough ⅛-inch thick. Dip a 2½-inch round cookie cutter or another shape of a similar size in flour and cut out cookies, cutting them as close together as possible to avoid excess scraps.

Arrange the rounds (or whatever shape your cookie cutter is) about 1 inch apart on the prepared baking sheets. Gather up the dough scraps and gently knead together, and cut out more cookies. If the dough becomes too soft to roll out, refrigerate until chilled. Refrigerate any remaining dough while you bake the first batch.

Bake, rotating the positions of the sheets from top to bottom and front to back halfway through baking, until the cookies are lightly browned on the edges and bottoms, about 15 minutes. The cookie tops will not brown, but do not underbake them or they will lack flavor. Let cool on the baking sheets 5 minutes. Transfer to wire cooling racks and let cool completely. Repeat with the remaining dough on cooled baking sheets (you can use the same parchment paper 2 times).

To dip the cookies, line baking sheets with parchment paper or baking mats. Melt chocolate in a double boiler (place it in a metal bowl above a pot of gently simmering water) or in the microwave (heat it on medium power — 50% — until fully melted, stirring at 30-second intervals). Place the bowl in a larger bowl of hot tap water to keep it warm enough for dipping, being careful not to splash water into the melted chocolate.

One at a time dip half of each cookie into the chocolate. Drag the bottom of the cookie across the rim of the bowl to remove excess chocolate, and place the cookie on the baking sheet. If the chocolate cools and thickens, briefly reheat until it is dipable again. Let the cookies stand until the chocolate sets and they can be easily lifted from the baking sheet, about 1 hour.

Adapted from “Baking for Friends” by Kathleen King

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