

20 Tips for Bakers

The 7 experts in our Food Department who make our wonderful Christmas cookies every year (miraculously, by the way, without putting on pounds!) shared their favorite hints:

Making the Dough

1 A pinch of this and a dash of that is a recipe for disaster; *measure everything!* Unlike soups and stews, where too much or too little of an ingredient blends in without much consequence, cookie recipes are exact formulas, and what you add—or subtract—could affect the final texture. (Exception: If you're stirring in spices like cloves or nutmeg, you can usually get away with a pinch instead of measuring out $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon, as long as you're not heavy-handed.)

2 Use dry measuring cups to measure dry ingredients and liquid measuring cups for wet ingredients; the 2 kinds of cups don't hold the same volume. How you measure flour is particularly important: Spoon it into a dry cup and level off with a straightedge. Don't pack it down, or your cookies may turn out rock-hard.

3 Assemble a *mise en place*, the French term for a lineup of premeasured ingredients, on the counter before you begin. (If you don't want to use—and then wash—custard cups and bowls, place dry ingredients on pieces of waxed paper.) This reduces your chances of omitting an ingredient or measuring it incorrectly.

4 Don't substitute a reduced-fat spread or stick if a recipe calls for margarine or butter. Butter and margarine have 80 percent fat content, and lighter products contain less than 80 percent—some as little as 25 percent. Use the trimmed-back products only in recipes specifically developed for them. Same goes for fruit-based fat substitutes. They create a texture that is cakey, not crisp and buttery—so they're best reserved for use with packaged cake mixes and in some brownies and oatmeal cookies, where you replace only part of the fat.

5 Be sure to soften—or chill—margarine or butter if the recipe calls for it. Some doughs (like spritz) won't blend

properly unless the butter is spoonable; leave it at room temperature until it's very soft and spreadable, but don't melt it (to speed up the process, cut it into small pieces). For other doughs, like some shortbreads, be aware that if the butter *isn't* refrigerated, the dough will be too soft and greasy to work with.

6 Unless the recipe says otherwise, mix dough only until blended after adding the flour. Overmixing results in tough cookies.

7 When dropping, shaping, or rolling and cutting dough, try to maintain a uniform size and thickness to ensure even baking. Follow directions exactly for amount of dough used per cookie. If recipe says, "Drop by rounded teaspoons," we mean measuring teaspoons, not spoons used to stir tea. A 1-inch ball should really be 1 inch in diameter—measure 1 to get the idea.

8 Roll dough on a flat smooth surface. Work from the center to the edge and cut out as many cookies as possible from each rolling (rerolled scraps make tougher cookies). If rolling dough between 2 sheets of waxed paper, sprinkle work surface with a bit of water to prevent paper from sliding.

Baking a Batch

9 Forget baking sheets with sides; cookies won't brown evenly in jelly-roll pans. You want a flat sheet with or without a lip on 1 end for holding it. For proper heat distribution, sheets should be at least 2 inches smaller in length and width than your oven.

10 Use the right pan size for bar cookies—a slightly smaller or bigger one could result in under- or overdone squares.

11 To speed things up (and avoid having to clean cookie sheets between batches), line sheets with foil or kitchen parchment. Grease or not, as recipe directs. As 1 batch bakes, set up next piece of foil with dough so it is ready to slide onto sheet.

Expert tip: Wash cookie sheets by hand and place in oven (turned off but still warm from baking) to dry. The same trick works for metal tins; put upside down in oven.

12 Down to the last batch with enough dough for only half a sheet? Spread cookies out evenly; a half-empty sheet can warp or buckle.

13 Cool sheets between batches. Placing dough on hot metal makes batter spread before it's in the oven, and cookies will be too flat.

Decorating by the Dozen

14 Divide Ornamental Frosting (page 193) into bowls. Using food-color pastes, tint each portion of frosting with a different color; cover surfaces with plastic wrap until ready to use, because the frosting dries out quickly.

15 For easy cleanup, use disposable piping bags or plastic food-storage bags with 1 corner snipped.

Storing a Stash

16 Cool cookies completely before packing in tins or other containers so they don't stick together, become misshapen, or get soggy.

17 Tuck treats into self-sealing bags with air squeezed out, metal tins (coffee cans work well), or sturdy plastic containers. Bar cookies can be stored in their baking pan, cut or uncut, covered with a layer of plastic wrap and foil.

18 Keep goodies at room temperature for 1 to 2 weeks, or freeze for up to 2 to 3 months, or as recipe directs. To defrost, just unwrap and thaw at room temperature.

19 Store soft cookies (like our Ginger Gems, page 205) with a wedge of apple or a slice of white bread to keep them moist; replace the fruit or bread every couple of days.

20 If you plan to keep cookies for an extended period, don't dust them with confectioners' sugar, or glaze or fill them. The sugar will be absorbed, stealing that pretty white finish; the glaze may dry and crystallize; and the jam will harden. For best results, dust, glaze, or fill right before serving—or giving away.