

Festive Gingerbread Cookies

Christmas season is the perfect time for a batch of delicious gingerbread cookies! Some people are intimidated by the idea of cut-out cookies, but if you follow these simple tips, you will have the perfect cookies to serve this holiday season.

Choosing Fat

Butter is the ideal fat when baking cookies because it adds the best flavor. You can also use stick margarine (with at least 80% fat content) or shortening to achieve similar results. All three fats add moisture, carry flavors, tenderize, and provide richness to cookies, so the choice is based on your preference and recipe instructions. When making cookies, avoiding whipped, tub, liquid, or reduced-fat products is best. These may cause the cookies to flatten and become tough.

Soften Your Butter

One of the first steps in most cookie recipes is to cream the butter and sugar together. For this to happen, the butter must first be softened (a table knife should glide through it, and you should be able to make an indentation with your finger).

When baking, I have forgotten to take ingredients like butter out. If you forgot to remove the butter from the fridge, resist the urge to stick it in the microwave for a few seconds. When 'softened' in the microwave, the butter is not evenly heated, causing some of it to soften faster and sometimes even melt. If you use butter that has been over-softened or melted, the cookies will spread out more and turn out greasy.

Handling the Dough

When baking cookies, it is important to pay attention to how much you mix the dough. If the dough is overmixed, the gluten in the flour will form elastic gluten strands, which causes a dense and tough cookie. Rerolling your dough too many times can also make a tough cookie. Try to roll the dough once, and then bake the irregular scraps to snack on!

Chill the Dough

It is best to chill the dough for easier handling when making cut-out cookies. It is best to chill the dough for 1 to 2 hours, especially if the dough is made with butter instead of shortening. To prevent the chilled dough from sticking, dust the rolling pin and work surface lightly.

Even Baking

When baking cookies, you want them all to evenly cook so they are all the same color and none are underdone. There are a few ways to ensure the cookies are evenly baked. First, make sure the dough is evenly rolled out. Unless otherwise listed on the recipe, it is best to roll the dough 1/4-inch thick because there is less breakage. The correct baking sheet will help you achieve a perfectly cooked cookie with the right color. Heavy-gauge aluminum baking sheets with low sides work best. Lining the cookie sheet with parchment paper will help avoid a dark finish on the cookies. Lastly, the cookies should be evenly spaced apart when baking. Unless the recipe states otherwise, place the cookies 1-2 inches apart so the cookies have good heat circulation.

Try to bake one sheet of cookies at a time, or switch baking sheet positions halfway through cook time if you bake more than one pan at a time.

Cool Your Cookies!

I know how exciting it is to decorate your amazing cut-out cookies, but ensuring they are completely cooled first is very important. Make sure to let them cool for 1 to 2 minutes on the cookie sheet, then transfer them to a cooling rack until they are entirely cooled.

It is also important to let the baking sheet cool before baking your next batch. The heat from the cookie sheet will cause the dough to soften, and the cookies will spread more than desired.

Now that you know all the secrets to perfect cut-out cookies, it is time to make your own gingerbread cookies! Deeply flavored with spices and molasses, gingerbread cookies are the essence of the holidays. I hope these make it to your holiday cookie tray!