

## Brandywine Table

# A Sweet Bite of Family History

CHERISHED COOKIE RECIPES ARE PERFECT FOR GIFT GIVING OVER THE HOLIDAYS

Courtney H. Diener-Stokes

A GIFT OF HOMEMADE COOKIES IS ONE OF MY favorite things to receive during the holidays. Mostly, these holiday recipes have history and tradition, and so are made with careful thought, consideration and extra love. Some cookies I've received over the years have stood out among the rest, whether for taste, technique, presentation or the story that's behind them, which often spans generations.

Diane McCormick, a prolific home baker, taught me a trick to having cookie recipients fully appreciate a gift of cookies during the busy holidays: be the first one to give them out the week immediately following Thanksgiving. It's a time when anticipation for the holidays is high and people aren't already burned out on cookie consumption.

When I first bit into McCormick's signature extra thin and crispy cutout sugar cookies decorated with colored sugars, it was clear there was deeper meaning behind them. Turns out McCormick

is the third generation to make this recipe, and her grandchildren, who help her make them today, represent the fifth.

McCormick was just five years old the first time she helped her grandmother make her treasured sugar cookie recipe. "It was always a family get-together with my mom, my aunt and my grandmother," McCormick says. She recalled getting her first turn at rolling out, cutting and sugaring the cookies. Through watching



over the years, she was instructed on the special technique of rolling the dough out extra thin.

Now, 77 years later, McCormick has passed on the same tradition and technique to her own children, Dawn and James, and now her grandchildren. "I'm happy to see that the tradition means a great deal to them, especially my granddaughter, Kylie, and my grandsons, Ryan and Connor, who come by and do their share when they're on Thanksgiving break from college."

On the weekend following Thanksgiving, McCormick's home is the location for 'Cookie Day,' where they gather and set out to make dozens upon dozens of sugar cookies before dividing them up into perfect piles, sealing them in plastic containers or tins and then gently placing them into decorative gift bags. As soon as four days after Thanksgiving, they begin delivering the cookies to friends, family, co-workers, teachers and schoolmates.

Please read on for McCormick's beloved sugar cookie recipe, along with some other special recipes shared by Chester County residents who've also found that cookies make the perfect gift for friends and family. Happy Holiday Baking!



Diane McCormick's grandchildren making sugar cookies

### Diane's Sugar Cookies

Diane McCormick and her daughter make several batches of dough for these sugar cookies prior to baking day. The dough needs to be refrigerated for at least 24 hours before rolling it out. Her tips for involving children in the process are based on her experience of letting them get started by choosing the colors of sprinkles and shapes of cutouts and then allowing them to evolve into making the cookies correctly without criticizing what they produce along the way. She has found that this tactic enables young bakers to fully enjoy being a part of the process and be more likely to carry on the tradition.

Today, McCormick's granddaughter, who's now a senior in high school and has perfected the technique of making the cookies, goes to the extra effort of taking special orders. Classmates get to request the shapes they'd like from a long list including Santas, reindeer, snowflakes and a bell.

After packing the cookies in festive tins or gift bags, they place packages of tea or hot chocolate inside to enhance the whole cookie experience for the recipients.



Makes about 6 dozen cutout sugar cookies (depending on size and thickness of cookies)

- 2 C. unsalted butter (1 lb.)
- 3 C. granulated sugar
- 3 eggs
- 2 tsp. pure vanilla extract
- 7 C. all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp. baking soda (dissolved in ½ C. boiling water)

Using a stand mixer, cream butter and sugar. Add the eggs, one at a time.

Next, add vanilla and then slowly add flour (mix on low speed). As soon as all the flour is incorporated into the dough, add the baking soda/water mix. It's very important not to overmix this dough. Stop mixing as soon as the liquid is mixed in.

Divide the dough into four sections (it will be somewhat soft) and wrap each quarter separately in wax paper. Put each wrapped section into a plastic bag and place in the refrigerator (not the freezer) to chill overnight. (Dough can rest in the refrigerator for up to two days.)

After chilling the dough for at least 24 hours, preheat the oven to 350°.

Next, flour your work surface. Using one package of dough at a time, roll it out and cut into desired shapes with cookie cutters (McCormick uses rolling pin covers and rolls the dough out on heavy-duty pastry cloths).

Decorate the cookies before baking, using colored sugars and sprinkles.

Place on an ungreased baking sheet and bake until lightly browned. Since ovens vary, start with 8 to 9 minutes.

When done, remove cookies from the baking sheet carefully and cool on baking racks. When completely cooled, store in airtight containers for up to two weeks.

### Olga's Oreshki Cookies

Here's a recipe for a cookie that is, to date, the most special cookie I've ever received as a gift over the holidays.

When my friend Olga Sorzano handed these out to me and other moms several years ago when our children were in preschool together, I was impressed with how much time she clearly put into making them. The cookies have a very fancy appearance of looking like a walnut shell with a hint of filling peeking out from the inside. When I bit into my first cookie, I was blown away. When you bite down on the crispy, buttery shell you next encounter the dulce de leche, which is a rich caramel filling. The textural experience and flavor of this cookie is like nothing I'd ever experienced.

Every time Sorzano makes these shortbread-style cookies, she's transported back to her childhood in Siberia. Aside from time and patience, you'll need to invest in a special stovetop 'Russian walnut cookie' mold, but I can assure you that it will be worth it once you taste them and give them out as gifts. The reactions you receive will be a reward for your effort. I couldn't agree more with Sorzano when she told me, "These are one of the most incredible cookies you will ever taste in your life."

While Olga still makes her dulce de leche the old-fashioned way by simmering a can of condensed milk on the stove for three hours, she offers a faster alternative of using ready-to-go dulce de leche to save you hours in the kitchen.

Makes 4 dozen cookies

#### For the cookie dough:

- 2½ C. all-purpose flour
- 1½ C. powdered sugar
- ¼ tsp. salt
- 1 C. cold butter
- 1 large egg, beaten
- ½ tsp. vanilla extract

#### For the filling:

- 1 can dulce de leche (Nestle's is Sorzano's go-to brand when she's in a pinch and can't make her own), or Nutella
- Excess cookie crumbs (reserve after baking the cookies)



**For the cookie dough:**

In a food processor, add flour, powdered sugar and salt. Pulse a few times and then gradually add cold butter. Continue mixing until the texture of the mixture resembles cornmeal.

Add egg and vanilla. Pulse until a dough is formed, but don't overmix.

Wrap dough in wax paper and refrigerate for half an hour.

Preheat your stovetop walnut cookie pan/mold according to instructions. Fill each cavity of the form with the dough balls and cook each side for about 2 to 3 minutes (again, following the instructions of the particular pan/mold you have).

After they have cooled, carefully break apart any cookies that have attached to each other while cooking.

Next, using your fingers, carefully break off any excess around each cookie half and reserve the crumbs in a bowl.

**To make the filling:**

Open a can of dulce de leche and spoon it out into a small bowl (as another filling option, Nutella can be used). Add leftover cookie crumb pieces and stir to combine.

**To assemble:**

Once all of the baked cookie halves have cooled, generously fill one cookie half with the dulce de leche mixture. Place an empty cookie half on top to adhere them together to form the walnut

shell shape. Repeat the process with the additional cookie halves.

Refrigerate the filled cookies for at least 30 minutes before eating or distributing.

If you have leftovers, the cookies should be stored in the refrigerator in a sealed container for up to a week. When ready to serve or give out, you can sprinkle the cookies with a small amount of powdered sugar for a light dusting.

**Stacey's Peanut Butter Blossoms**

When Stacey Casto's four children were young, she recalls getting out her handwritten recipe book each year leading up to Christmas to make five beloved cookie recipes. One of her favorites has always been Peanut Butter Blossoms, which are the perfect combination of a soft peanut butter-based cookie topped with a chocolate kiss. Instead of using standard white sugar to coat the outside, she uses green and red to make them festive for the holidays.

Any time I go to a cookie swap, I take a version of this cookie, except that I use milk chocolate Wilbur Buds instead of Hershey Kisses because of their amazing creaminess. The cookies always get rave reviews. They look more difficult to make than they are given their attractive presentation. Even kids can easily get in on the fun process of rolling the dough into balls and then coating them in sugar before baking. You can also put the kiddos to work unwrapping all the chocolate kisses!

After the cookies are finished baking, be sure to let the chocolate kiss fully cool and harden on top of each cookie before packing them up for gift-giving.

Makes about 4 dozen cookies (varies depending on the size of balls you make with the dough)



- ½ C. granulated sugar
- ½ C. brown sugar
- ½ C. creamy peanut butter (unsweetened)
- ½ C. butter
- 1 egg
- 2 T. milk
- 1 tsp. vanilla
- 1¾ C. all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- ¼ tsp. salt
- ½ C. red and green sugar, combined or ¼ C. of each color (for coating)
- 48 Hershey Kisses, unwrapped, or Wilbur Buds

Preheat the oven to 375°.

Using a stand mixer, add all cookie ingredients (except decorative sugars or chocolate) and mix on low to fully combine until dough forms. Cover and refrigerate the soft dough for at least one hour.

Shape rounded teaspoons of dough into balls. Roll balls in a small bowl of sugar (one bowl if combining colors or two separate bowls of each color if not combining). Evenly space the coated balls on an ungreased cookie sheet.

Bake for 10 to 12 minutes, until bottoms are lightly browned and the tops are slightly cracked.

After fully cooked, remove the cookie sheet from the oven and place on a flat surface. Immediately press one chocolate kiss or bud in the center of each cookie.

Carefully transfer cookies to a cooling rack and allow cookies and chocolate to fully cool to set.

Store in an airtight container for up to one week.

**Cindy's Sand Tarts**

Cindy Maguire's Sand Tart recipe was passed down from her grandmother to her mother, Diane Yeakle of Chester Springs. This recipe always came out during the holidays, when Maguire recalls the steps of making them from when she pitched in as a child.

Each cookie is brushed with egg white prior to topping them with sliced almonds and nutmeg or cinnamon sugar. (You can also use pecans or walnuts and decorative sugars as topping alternatives.) There isn't a leavening agent in this recipe since the cookies are intended to be thin — what sets a sand tart apart from a sugar cookie.

The perfect combination of nuts, a warming spice and delicate buttery cookie makes this treat a lovely holiday gift rooted in Pennsylvania Dutch tradition.

Makes about 4 dozen cookies

- 1 C. unsalted butter
- 1½ C. granulated sugar
- 2 C. all-purpose flour
- 1 egg, well beaten
- 1 egg white (for brushing on top of cookies before baking)



PHOTO CREDIT: MY COOKIE JOURNEY BLOG

Nutmeg or cinnamon sugar (made with ½ C. granulated sugar + 1 T. ground cinnamon)

½ C. sliced almonds (or pecans or walnuts)

Preheat the oven to 350°.

In a stand-up mixer, cream butter and sugar. Slowly add flour to fully combine on low speed. Add well-beaten egg and mix thoroughly.

Cover and chill in the refrigerator overnight.

Pull ¼ portion of dough from the refrigerator at a time and flour your work surface before rolling out the dough very thinly. Cut out with a 3"-round cookie cutter (or other cookie cutter shapes) and place on a parchment-lined cookie sheet.

Brush each cookie with egg white before decorating.

Sprinkle the tops of the cookies with a dash of nutmeg or a sprinkle of cinnamon sugar. Top with a few sliced almonds or other nuts per cookie (lightly press the nuts to set into the dough).

Bake for 10 minutes until the bottoms of the cookies are lightly browned.

Store in an airtight container for up to one week. ♦

*Courtney Diener-Stokes is an award-winning journalist, author, food writer, photographer and food stylist. Most recently she co-authored the Kimberton Whole Foods Cookbook and Farmhouse Manna: Nourishing Recipes and Rituals for Head, Heart, Hands & Soul. She lives in the Oley Valley countryside with her husband, three children, two Babydoll Southdown sheep, a flock of bantam chickens and a Bernedoodle named Daisy.*



For more great recipes visit [CountyLinesMagazine.com](http://CountyLinesMagazine.com)