

Christmas Cookies In July

by Lynne Belluscio

The history of Christmas cookies originates centuries ago, although it is generally agreed that it is the Dutch that brought the cookie – and the Christmas cookie to America. The word cookie is derived from the Dutch word “koekjes” which translated means “spice cookie.”

I have often thought, that since the LeRoy family came to America from Holland and spoke Dutch, that perhaps they knew of “koekjes.” Cookies were also known as “little cakes” and they were difficult to bake in a big brick oven. It took at least an hour to heat the oven with a large wood fire and once you raked out the hot coals, you had to put in the bread and pies and seal the oven door before the heat escaped. Every time you opened the door, the temperature lowered and there was no way to bring the heat back up. So it was impractical to bake cookies in a wood-fired oven. Cookies were often baked in a tin reflector oven in front of the fire.

The first American Christmas cookie recipe (actually the word for recipe was receipt) was included in the first American receipt book by Amelia Simmons, published in 1796. The recipe was repeated in another cookbook published in 1812 in Walpole, New Hampshire.

To three pound flour, sprinkle a tea cup of fine powdered coriander seed, rub in one pound butter, and one and half pound sugar, dissolve three tea spoonfuls of pearl ash in a tea cup of milk, knead all together well, roll three quarters of an inch thick, and cut or stamp into shape and size you please, bake slowly fifteen or twenty minutes; tho' hard and dry at first, if put into an earthen pot, and dry cellar, or damp room, they will be finer, softer and better when six months old.

Taking a look at the receipt



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there are some obvious historical aspects. First, a “tea cup of fine powdered coriander.” This is a pungent spice that adds a citrus flavor to the cookie. The seeds are from the cilantro plant which was grown in the Mediterranean region and was brought to America and grown in herb gardens in the 1600s. Next is the pearl ash, which was an early type of leavening, used like baking soda. Pearl ash was made from refined potash, derived from the lye made from wood ashes. Of course, if you read the last part of the receipt, you realize that its too late to make these cookies for this year. They need to be stored in an earthen pot in a damp room for six months.

I looked on the internet and discovered that Martha Stewart took Amelia Simmon’s receipt and adapted it for the modern kitchen. So you don’t need to find pearl ash and she has softened the dough by adding 2 eggs. Apparently the cookies don’t need to be aged for 6 months. I hope to try Martha’s recipe this year.

3 cups all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
1/4 teaspoon salt

2 tsp. ground coriander
1 1/2 cups granulated sugar
1/2 cup packed light-brown sugar
1 cup unsalted butter, (2 sticks), softened
2 large eggs

Sanding sugar, for sprinkling
1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Whisk flour, baking soda, coriander and salt into a bowl; set aside.

2. Using an electric mixer, beat sugars and butter at a medium speed until pale and fluffy. Add eggs, one at a time, until mixed. Scrape down bowl with a rubber spatula.

3. Reduce mixer speed to low and gradually add flour mixture. Mix until just combined.

4. Scoop dough into a ziploc bag or sheet of plastic wrap. Form into a ball and refrigerate for at least an hour.

5. Break off a 1/4 of the dough ball. On a generously floured surface, roll out dough until it is 1/4 inch thick. Cut or stamp in shape and size you please, and place on a baking sheet. Sprinkle tops with sanding sugar, then lightly brush with a wet pastry brush; sprinkle with more sanding sugar.



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