

Holiday FLAVORS





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A Cookie Exchange Comeback

Few holiday traditions combine baking, friendship and gift-giving quite like a cookie exchange.

While the parties became especially popular during the 1950s and 1960s, their roots stretch back much further. The cookie exchange endures today as one of the season's most beloved events.

HISTORY

Families, church groups, and women's organizations were already sharing homemade baked goods and recipes by the late 1800s. Some historians believe informal cookie exchanges date to this period, although they weren't yet a standardized holiday event, according to Cookie-Exchange.com.

Newspapers began using terms like "cookie exchange" and "cookie swap" between the 1910s and 1930s. In the

1950s and 1960s, cookie swaps really took off across the United States, becoming popular among postwar suburban neighborhoods, church groups, bridge clubs and women's organizations, according to King Arthur Baking Company.

Many families appreciate cookie exchanges because they save time, reduce holiday baking stress and allow everyone to enjoy a greater variety of homemade treats.

HOW IT WORKS

Each participant bakes one type of cookie, then trades with the other guests. Instead of spending days baking a dozen different recipes, each person makes just one recipe and goes home with a wide assortment. Here are the steps to hosting your own cookie exchange.

Invite participants. Six to 12 people is a manageable size, though exchanges can be larger.

Bake one recipe. Each guest bakes one kind of cookie. The number of cookies each guest should bring depends on the size of the exchange. A common rule is one dozen cookies for every participant, plus a few extras for sampling.

Label and display cookies. Everyone arranges their cookies on a table with a label that includes the cookie name, ingredients that may trigger allergies (such as nuts, dairy, eggs or wheat) and an optional recipe card for guests to take home.

Sample and socialize. Guests enjoy refreshments while tasting a few cookies before the exchange begins.

Exchange cookies. Each guest takes an equal number of cookies from everyone else's batch. If there are 10 participants, each person leaves with about nine different varieties plus any leftovers.

Package cookies. Bring tins, bakery boxes or reusable containers to trans-

port the assortment home.

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL EXCHANGE

- Ask guests to sign up in advance so no two people make the same cookie.
- Encourage sturdy cookies that travel well, such as chocolate chip, snickerdoodles, gingerbread, peanut butter blossoms, biscotti and spritz cookies.
- Avoid cookies that require refrigeration unless everyone can keep them cold.
- Include allergy-friendly options such as gluten-free or nut-free cookies.

Make the exchange a festive event by serving hot cocoa or coffee, playing holiday music, holding a "favorite cookie" vote or collecting donations for a local food pantry or charity.

Everyone goes home with a beautiful assortment of homemade cookies to enjoy with family, serve at holiday gatherings, or package as gifts — all while baking only a single recipe.



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Gifts You Can Eat

Homemade gifts show the recipient you cared enough to craft something special just for them.

Go one step further with edible gifts that friends and neighbors can snack on throughout the season.

EDIBLE GIFT INSPIRATION

Here are some ideas to get you started on treats that are nice enough to gift.

Flavored salts and sugars. Flavored salts and infused sugars make inexpensive gourmet gifts. Package in small jars

with handwritten labels for cooks, bakers, coffee lovers and cocktail enthusiasts.

Homemade vanilla extract. Homemade vanilla extract requires only vanilla beans, vodka and time. Bottled in decorative jars, it becomes a thoughtful gift bakers will appreciate year-round.

Hot cocoa mixes. Layer homemade hot cocoa mix in jars with mini marshmallows, chocolate chips or peppermint

candies. Include preparation instructions for a comforting homemade holiday gift.

Candied nuts. Sweet-and-spiced candied nuts are easy to prepare and package. They make delicious gifts, party snacks or additions to holiday charcuterie boards and dessert tables.

Spice blends. Custom spice blends let home cooks recreate favorite flavors. Package seasonings in small jars with suggested uses for grilling, soups, vegetables or roasted meats.

Jam and preserves. Homemade jams and preserves capture seasonal fruit flavors

in attractive jars. Pair them with fresh bread, crackers or biscuits for memorable holiday gifts.

Attractive, budget-friendly packaging ideas. Dress up homemade gifts with mason jars, ribbon, fabric scraps, kraft paper tags, festive twine and reusable baskets for beautiful presentations without overspending.

Food safety. Package gifts in clean, food-safe containers and include preparation or storage instructions when appropriate. Refrigerate items that require it, and label foods that contain common allergens such as nuts, dairy, eggs or wheat.

MULLING SPICES FOR HOT APPLE CIDER
Recipe is from SustainableintheSuburbs.com.

Ingredients

- 5 to 8 cinnamon sticks
- 1 tbsp whole allspice
- 1 to 2 whole nutmeg seeds
- 10 to 15 cloves
- 2 to 3 star anise
- 1/2 cup dried cranberries

Directions

1. Assemble in a jam jar.
2. Attach a tag that reads: Bring 1 quart of apple cider and mulling spices to boil over medium heat. Simmer for 1 hour on low heat. Serve warm in a cute mug with a cookie or two.

Festive Drinks for Every Celebration

Holiday gatherings aren't complete without festive drinks.

Whether you're hosting Christmas brunch, a neighborhood cookie exchange or a New Year's Eve celebration, seasonal beverages help create a warm, welcoming atmosphere for guests of every age.

Hot chocolate bar. Popular for children, a hot chocolate bar allows everyone to customize their own cup of cocoa. Popular toppings include crushed candy canes, marshmallows, white chocolate curls, whipped cream, flavored syrups, toffee bits, chopped nuts and crushed pretzels for a salty touch. The possibilities are nearly endless. For an adult audience, add booze such as Kahlua, Baileys Irish Cream or bourbon.

Mulled cider. Mulled cider is a seasonal favorite, but why limit yourself to the traditional recipe. Shake things up with a splash of pineapple juice and a pinch of salt to temper the sweetness and add bright, fruity notes. Or swap out part of the apple cider for 100% cranberry juice, tart cherry juice, or a splash of pomegranate. Channel a cup of hot chai with steeped cardamom pods, crushed black peppercorns and fresh ginger alongside the traditional cinnamon and cloves. For the adults, add a splash of Fireball and a cinnamon stick for a spicy kick.

Eggnog. Eggnog is a rich,



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creamy, sweetened dairy-based beverage traditionally made with milk, cream, sugar, and whipped eggs (giving it a frothy texture). Here are some add-ins you can consider for a twist on the classic. Stir in a shot of cold brew, espresso or a splash of Kahlua. Pair smoky Scotch or bourbon with light brown sugar. Swirl in a few dashes of Angostura or ginger bitters, or try mixing in mango puree and a dash of Tajin for a viral "swicy" twist. For an updated presentation, rim

glasses with crushed ginger snaps, dust with cocoa powder, or drizzle with warm caramel sauce.

Holiday punches. It's not a party without punch. A classic, crowd-pleasing holiday punch combines tart cranberry juice, sweet orange juice, and bubbly ginger ale. It is incredibly easy to customize. Keep it family-friendly with sparkling water or lemon-lime soda, or make an adult version with vodka, rum or sparkling wine. Garnish the bowl with

fresh cranberries, orange slices and rosemary sprigs for a festive presentation.

Mocktails. Mocktails have become one of the biggest entertaining trends in recent years, ensuring everyone has something festive to sip. Tart cranberry and pomegranate juices pair beautifully with citrus and sparkling mixers for colorful drinks that look just as elegant as traditional cocktails.

Here's a recipe from GoodFood.com.

POMEGRANATE MARTINI MOCKTAIL

Ingredients

ice
150 milliliters non-alcoholic gin
200 milliliters pomegranate juice
1 tablespoon pomegranate seeds, to garnish (optional)
1 orange, juiced

Directions

Put a handful of ice, the gin alternative, pomegranate juice and orange juice in a cocktail shaker and shake. Strain into two martini glasses and drop in the pomegranate seeds.

The Science of Holiday Baking

Holiday baking is a creative way to celebrate the season. Behind the artistry, however, is a whole lot of science.

Baking is essentially applied chemistry. Every ingredient — from flour and eggs to butter and sugar — plays a specific molecular role, and every mixing method creates a foundation for the chemical and physical reactions that occur in the oven.

THE FOUR PILLARS OF BAKING

Five of the most important ingredients in many baked goods are flour, sugar, eggs, fat and leavening.

Flour: Provides the structural foundation. When mixed with liquid, its proteins (gliadin and glutenin) form a stretchy, elastic network called gluten. More kneading yields chewier textures (like bread), while less yields a tender crumb (like cakes).

Sugar: Beyond adding sweetness, sugar tenderizes by retaining moisture and traps air when creamed with butter. It also triggers the Maillard reaction (the basis of surface browning and flavor development).

Eggs: Act as a binder, provide structure through protein coagulation and trap expanding air, which provides leavening. The yolks act as emulsifiers, helping



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fats and liquids mix smoothly.

Fats: Shorten gluten strands to keep baked goods tender. When creamed with sugar, fats also hold small pockets of air that expand in the heat to make cakes light and fluffy.

Leavening agents: Baking powder, baking soda and yeast release gases that make baked goods rise. Fresh leavening is essential for light cakes, biscuits and breads.

TROUBLESHOOTING

If your holiday baking project doesn't turned out as planned, there's likely a scientific explanation.

Cookies spread too much. This could happen because the

butter is too warm, you used too little flour or the dough wasn't chilled. Chill dough 30 to 60 minutes so the fat solidifies before baking. Measure flour accurately using the spoon-and-level method.

Cookies don't spread. This typically happens when there's too much flour or the oven is too cool. Weigh ingredients when possible and verify oven temperature with an oven thermometer.

Tough cookies. The culprit here is too much gluten development. Mix only until ingredients are combined. Higher-protein flour creates more gluten than all-purpose flour.

Dry cakes. This is caused by over-baking or too much flour. Remove cakes as soon as a toothpick comes out with a few moist crumbs. Use a kitchen scale for measurement accuracy.

Pie crust isn't flaky. This happens when the butter is too warm. Cold butter creates steam pockets that produce flaky layers. Keep ingredients cold.

Bread doesn't rise. Flat bread is caused by inactive yeast or liquid that's too hot. Water between about 100°F and 110 degrees Fahrenheit is ideal for activating active dry yeast. Excessive heat kills yeast cells.

Grainy fudge. When sugar crystals form during cooking, fudge turns out grainy. Avoid stirring once boiling begins unless the recipe directs it, and cool to the proper temperature before beating.

Flat meringue. This happens when fat contaminates the egg whites. Even a trace of yolk prevents egg white proteins from forming a stable foam. Use clean, grease-free equipment.

Royal icing won't harden. Too much liquid or humid weather can cause royal icing to resist hardening. Adjust with more powdered sugar and allow extra drying time in a low-humidity environment.

Holiday Charcuterie Boards

Creative grazing boards are festive centerpieces for holiday parties, open houses, family gatherings and New Year's celebrations.

Holiday charcuterie boards combine convenience with visual appeal. Because guests serve themselves, they're ideal for casual entertaining and can often be assembled almost entirely from grocery store ingredients. The best boards balance flavors, textures and colors rather than simply piling on expensive ingredients, according to Real Simple.

SEASONAL CHEESES

Offer three to five cheeses with different textures and milk types. Ideas include creamy brie, sharp cheddar, goat cheese, smoked Gouda, Manchego and blue cheese. A combination of soft, semi-soft, firm and aged cheeses appeals to a wide range of tastes. Real Simple recommends about 2 to 3 ounces of cheese per guest for an appetizer board.

CURED MEATS

Choose two or three varieties with contrasting flavors. Popular options include prosciutto, Genoa salami, soppressata, pepperoni and capocollo. Fold slices into ribbons or rosettes to add height and visual interest.



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FRESH AND DRIED FRUITS

Winter fruits add natural sweetness and vibrant color. Seasonal fruit provides a fresh contrast to rich meats and cheeses, according to Camille Styles. Good choices include pears, apples, clementines, grapes, pomegranate arils, fresh cranberries, dried apricots, dates, figs and dried cranberries.

NUTS, CRACKERS AND CHOCOLATE

Fill empty spaces with

crunchy accompaniments such as pistachios, candied pecans, Marcona almonds, mixed nuts, water crackers, crostini, breadsticks, dark chocolate squares or chocolate-covered almonds. Include a mixture of sweet and savory options for maximum variety, recommends Real Simple.

HOLIDAY CANDIES

Small treats help turn a standard cheese board into a holiday display. Ideas include chocolate truffles, candy canes, peppermint bark, choc-

olate-covered cherries, Jordan almonds and mini gingerbread cookies. Use candies sparingly as colorful accents rather than the main attraction.

FESTIVE GARNISHES

Fresh herbs instantly create a seasonal look. Try rosemary sprigs, fresh thyme or sage. Other garnish ideas include cinnamon sticks, star anise, sugared cranberries, orange slices, small bowls of honey, fig jam or cranberry preserves. Arrange ingredients in small clusters and fill gaps

with herbs and garnishes for a full, abundant appearance.

PRESENTATION TIPS

Presentation is key to a charcuterie board that will wow. Start with cheeses first, then add meats, then fill spaces with fruits and nuts, and finish with crackers, spreads and garnishes. Provide separate knives or spreaders for soft cheeses and jams. Let cheeses sit at room temperature for 30 to 60 minutes before serving for the best flavor, recommends Flourish Marketplace.

Family, Heritage and Community

The foods served during Kwanzaa's Karamu feast reflect the holiday's seven principles while celebrating the rich culinary traditions of Africa, the Caribbean and the American South.

Kwanzaa is a seven-day cultural celebration observed annually from December 26 through January 1. Created in 1966 by Maulana Karenga, it honors African heritage, family, community and culture. The celebration concludes with Karamu, a joyful communal feast held on December 31. Unlike religious holidays with prescribed meals, Kwanzaa encourages families to create traditions that reflect their own ancestry and community, according to the National Museum of African American History.

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES AROUND THE TABLE

Every day of Kwanzaa celebrates one of the Nguzo Saba (Seven Principles):

- Umoja (unity)
- Kujichagulia (self-determination)
- Ujima (collective work and responsibility)
- Ujamaa (cooperative economics)
- Nia (purpose)



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- Kuumba (creativity)
- Imani (faith)

The Karamu feast reflects many of these values through shared cooking, passing family recipes from one generation to the next, supporting Black-owned businesses when purchasing ingredients and gathering around one table, according to the National Museum of African American History.

THE MEANING OF KARAMU

“Karamu” simply means “feast,” but it is much more than a large meal. Food be-

comes a way of celebrating history while strengthening family bonds.

Many celebrations include storytelling, music, dance, poetry, honoring ancestors, discussing the Seven Principles and sharing the Unity Cup, according to Rivers of Steel.

FOODS THAT OFTEN APPEAR ON THE KARAMU TABLE

There is no official Kwanzaa menu, but many families choose dishes representing the broader African diaspora.

Common favorites include:

Southern foods such as black-eyed peas, collard greens, candied sweet potatoes, cornbread, fried or roasted chicken and macaroni and cheese; and West African-influenced foods, such as Jollof rice, peanut stews, plantains, okra, rice dishes and yams.

Popular desserts include sweet potato pie, pound cake, coconut cake, fresh fruit and bread pudding.

Karamu feasts often feature recipes from multiple regions on one table, illustrating the diversity of African-descended cultures, according to Eating Well.

REGIONAL AND FAMILY TRADITIONS

One family's Karamu may resemble a Southern Sunday dinner, while another highlights Nigerian, Jamaican, Ethiopian or Gullah Geechee recipes.

Many families blend heirloom recipes with newly discovered African dishes, Caribbean specialties, locally grown produce and modern healthy adaptations.

The emphasis is not authenticity to one cuisine but honoring heritage through meaningful food traditions, writes Eating Well.