

Celebrating Cookie Exchange Day



Peacan Pie Bars.

PHOTO BY TINKY WEISBLAT

By TINKY WEISBLAT
For the Recorder

I know I wrote about cookies and a virtual cookie exchange last week, and this paper featured some excellent guidelines for cookie swaps. Nevertheless, I am obliged as a food writer to return to the topic again this week. Today, Dec. 22, is National Cookie Exchange Day.

I long suspected that this holiday had something to do with the cookie-industrial complex. That didn't keep me from celebrating the day, but I tried to bake ironically.

Happily, I have since learned that National Cookie Exchange Day was the brainchild of a freelance writer and pet sitter (we writers have to cobble together a living!) named Jace Shoemaker-Galloway. Shoemaker-Galloway, who lives in Illinois, calls herself the Queen of Holidays.

Americans are more or less unique in the English-speaking world in using the term "cookie" for small, sweet snacks. The "Food Timeline," cites two reasons for our departure from the English word "biscuit":

"(1) Our early Dutch heritage and (2) Our revolution-

ary tradition of separating ourselves from 'all things British.'"

Dutch settlers to this country called their treats "koekjes," small cakes. This term soon became "cookies" to Dutch and Anglo New Yorkers.

New York, our nation's first capital and a center of Dutch-American life, soon convinced the rest of the United States to use the word "cookie." It's a comforting word, one that speaks of home and hearth.

Amelia Simmons of Connecticut, our country's first cookbook author, used the spelling "cookey" in her landmark 1796 book "American Cookery."

The Time-Life book "Cookies & Crackers" notes that cookies have an ancient history.

"Like cakes and pastries, cookies and crackers are the descendants of the earliest foods cooked by man — grain-water paste baked on hot stones more than 10,000 years ago," write the authors.

According to the "Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America," pre-20th-century American cookies "were baked as special treats because of the cost of sweet-



"The Best Cookies" on a plate.

PHOTO BY TINKY WEISBLAT

ness and the amount of time and labor required for preparation."

Luckily, most of us can now afford a bit of sweetness at this time of year. The time and labor may have been reduced, but they still hover over the cookie-making process. They make cookies more precious to those of us who give and receive them.

Cookie parties over the holidays have been popular throughout American history. According to the Christian Science Monitor, George Washington adopted the Dutch habit of hosting a cookie party for the new year when he was president.

No one is sure exactly

when the exchange of Christmas cookies became widespread, however.

According to the website "Cookie-Exchange.com," the oldest documented cookie exchange was in Syracuse, N.Y., in 1936. The Syracuse Home Bureau's Lincoln Unit advertised that it was holding a cookie exchange, along with "a lesson for remodeling hats given by Miss Maude Loftus."

I have a feeling — and so does the exchange website — that cookie swaps were around for quite a while before that. I have always enjoyed these occasions.

They're a simple way to entertain guests during the holidays: no elaborate menu is re-

quired, and the host or hostess doesn't have to do all the food preparation.

Just about everyone has a go-to cookie to share during this festive season, and just about every cookie has a story behind it. Many of us feel cautious about large get-togethers right now. Nevertheless, small cookie exchanges can help us share the fun of the season.

We can swap cookies and recipes with our immediate friends and relatives. We can deliver assorted cookies to shut-ins. Each cookie reminds its receiver that someone has cared enough to bake.

Here are a couple of recipes to get you going on

your own cookie exchange. Both are shortbread-based bars. They are surprisingly different, however.

The first, for sweet but satisfying Pecan Pie Bars, comes from last week's Greenfield Public Library Zoom cookie exchange. It was shared by Mary McDonough. McDonough, who loves pecan pie, said her bars are even tastier than the actual pie. My sister-in-law, the Pecan Queen, concurs.

The second is my family's go-to recipe for cookies/bars at this time of year. They used to have another name, but when my nephew, Michael,

SEE COOKIES B4



PHOTO BY TINKY WEISBLAT

A vintage Christmas card.

Cookies

FROM B3

was about 3, he ate a couple and announced, "These are the best cookies!" They have been called the Best Cookies ever since.

Merry Christmas. Happy baking.

Pecan Pie Bars

Ingredients for the base:

2½ cups flour
1 cup (2 sticks) butter, cut into pieces
½ cup powdered sugar
¼ teaspoon salt

Ingredients for the filling:

4 eggs
1½ cups light or dark corn syrup
1½ cups sugar
3 tablespoons butter, melted and then slightly cooled
1½ teaspoons vanilla extract
2½ cups coarsely chopped pecans

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Mix the flour, the butter, the powdered sugar and the salt with an electric mixer until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs. (I started with a pastry blender, then used the mixer, and then used my hands. The butter is a lit-

tle resistant.)

Press the dough firmly and evenly into a greased 13-by-10- or 9-by-13- or 17-by-12-inch pan. (I used a 9-by-13-inch pan.)

Bake this cookie base until it is a very light golden brown (about 20 minutes). Leave the oven on when you remove the pan.

While the dough is baking, prepare the filling. Beat together the eggs, the corn syrup, the sugar, the butter and the vanilla in a large bowl until they are well blended. Stir in the pecans. Pour this mixture over the hot base when it comes out of the oven.

Bake the cookies until the filling is firm around the edges and slightly firm in the center, about 25 minutes. Cool the bars completely on a wire rack before cutting and serving. You may use almonds or walnuts instead of the pecans. Makes about four dozen cookies, depending on how you cut them.

The Best Cookies

Ingredients:

1 cup (2 sticks) sweet butter, at room temperature
1 cup brown sugar, firmly packed
1 egg yolk, beaten
1 teaspoon vanilla
2 cups sifted flour
7 to 8 ounces milk choco-

late, melted in a double boiler while the cookies are baking
Blanched almonds to taste

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Cream the butter and the sugar together until they are light and fluffy. Add the beaten egg yolk, the vanilla and the flour.

Spread this mixture onto an ungreased medium (around 10-by-14-inch) cookie sheet, patting it out to the edges with your fingers and palms.

If you have only a large cookie sheet, don't stretch the dough all the way to the edges; it should not be overly thin. I usually line the sheet with a silicone sheet or parchment paper.

Bake the cookies for 15 to 20 minutes, until they are a light brown. Remove them from the oven.

Quickly spread the melted chocolate over the top of the baked cookie dough. Grate almonds over all. (They will look like little snowflakes on top of the chocolate.) Cool and cut into pieces. Makes about 36 cookies.

Tinky Weisblat is the award-winning author of "The Pudding Hollow Cookbook," "Pulling Taffy," and "Love, Laughter, and Rhubarb." Visit her website, Tinky-Cooks.com.