

Sweets for my sweet

Discover the joy of baking this festive season to bring cheer and create cherished memories of time spent together

EDITED BY EMMA COXON

Baking, it is said, is good for the soul, and what better time of year to enjoy this simple pleasure than at Christmas. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine the aroma of warm winter spices from freshly baked cookies filling the air, conjuring up memories of childhood. A family tradition for many, baking is a chance to gather in the heart of the home, and little ones will love lending a helping hand with the dough, decoration and tasting, of course!

In her book, *Christmas Cookies* (Ryland Peters & Small, £9.99), *MasterChef* finalist and food writer, Hannah Miles, shares ideas for creative baked treats, perfect as gifts or to be enjoyed at home. There is something to delight everyone – even Santa!

MINI GINGERBREAD HOUSES

It's time to get creative and make your very own delicious and delightful gingerbread houses, good enough to rival that of Hansel and Gretel!

MAKES 8

For the cookies

- 125g butter
- 100g caster sugar
- 3 heaped tbsp dark treacle
- 300g plain flour, sifted, plus extra for dusting
- 1 tsp bicarbonate of soda
- 2 tsp ground ginger
- 1 tsp pure vanilla extract or ½ tsp vanilla bean powder
- 400g royal icing sugar, sifted
- Sprinkles and sugar crystals

For the gingerbread house templates

- 3cm square (cardboard works well)
- 2.5cm square; and an end panel with pointed roof that is 2.5cm square, but raising to 4cm at the roof point

1 Preheat the oven to 180°C, gas mark 4.

2 In a saucepan, heat the butter, sugar and treacle over a gentle heat, until the butter has completely melted. Sift the flour, bicarbonate of soda and ginger into a mixing bowl. Whisk or beat in the butter mixture and vanilla. The dough will be very soft and warm.

3 Transfer to a cool bowl and leave for about 30 minutes. The dough should become firmer as it cools.

4 On a flour-dusted surface, roll the dough to 5mm thick and cut out eight circles using a cutter. Then, reroll and cut out 16 of each template to make all the pieces for the gingerbread houses.

5 Place the gingerbread on baking sheets and bake in a preheated oven for 8-10 minutes, until the gingerbread is firm to the touch. Leave to cool completely on a wire rack.

6 Whisk or beat the icing sugar with 3 tablespoons of water, until you have a smooth, thick icing that holds a peak. Spoon the icing into a piping or pastry bag and pipe windows and doors onto the wall panels of gingerbread.

7 The icing will dry reasonably quickly, so assemble one cookie at a time. Add a little icing to one of the round cookies and press one gingerbread panel with the pointed roof into the centre of the cookie to secure.

8 Pipe icing around all the edges of the panel, then press the two side panels into the icing so that they attach to the front of the house securely. Repeat with the back panel.

9 Pipe icing around the top of the house and press on the roof panels. Pipe a row of icing where the top panels join to seal the roof.

10 Decorate with pretty patterns. Repeat with the remaining houses until you have eight. The cookies will store for up to three days in an airtight container.





MERINGUE SNOWMEN

Injected with Lotus Biscoff spread, these decadent cookie snowmen have an aromatic spiced caramel flavour.

MAKES 14

For the snowmen

- 1 egg white
- 60g caster sugar
- For the cookies**
- 115g butter, softened
- 130g caster sugar
- 60g full-fat cream cheese
- 60g Lotus Biscoff spread or peanut butter
- 170g self-raising flour, sifted
- 100g white chocolate chips
- 140g white chocolate, melted
- 3 tbsp icing sugar, sifted
- Orange and black food colouring gels

- 1** Preheat the oven to 130°C, gas mark 1/2.
- 2** Begin by making the snowmen. Whisk the egg white to stiff peaks. Gradually add the sugar, whisking until the meringue is glossy. Spoon the meringue into a piping bag and pipe 14 circles about 3cm in diameter onto a baking sheet. On top of each, pipe a smaller ball for the body, then a third, smaller one on top for the head. Bake in the oven for 45-60 minutes until the meringue is crisp. Leave to cool.
- 3** Increase the oven temperature to 180°C, gas mark 4. Whisk together the butter, sugar and cream cheese until light and creamy. Add the spread and whisk in. Add the flour and chocolate chips and whisk in. Put 14 spoonfuls of the dough on a second baking sheet, a small distance apart.
- 4** Bake in the preheated oven for 10-15 minutes until the cookies are golden brown. Leave to cool for a few minutes on the baking sheet, then transfer to a rack to cool.
- 5** Spoon a little of the melted white chocolate over each of the cookies and place a meringue snowman in the centre of each. In a mixing bowl, mix the icing sugar with a little water and orange food colouring. Use a toothpick to draw noses on each of the snowmen. Add a little black food colouring to the icing, then use a second toothpick to add eyes, mouths, buttons and arms. Leave to set.



SANTA COOKIES

These festive biccies are decorated using royal icing and give the perfect shape for Santa's hat and beard.

MAKES 10

For the cookies

- 115g butter, softened
- 60g caster sugar
- 170g plain flour, sifted, plus extra for dusting
- Grated zest of 2 clementines
- A little milk, if needed
- To decorate**
- 400g royal icing sugar, sifted
- Red and black food colouring gels
- Large white snowflake sprinkles, or similar

- 1** Whisk together the butter and sugar. Add the flour and zest and whisk to form a dough, adding milk if needed. Wrap in clingfilm. Chill for 30 mins. Preheat the oven to 180°C, gas mark 4. On a flour-dusted surface, roll the dough to 5mm thick. Cut out 10 diamonds with 8cm sides. Put on baking sheets and bake for 10-15 minutes until the cookies are golden brown. Cool on a wire rack.
- 2** Whisk the icing sugar with 3 tablespoons of water to make a stiff icing. Colour a third of the icing red and spoon 2 spoonfuls into a piping bag. Spoon 5 spoonfuls of white icing into another. Pipe a red line along the top two edges of the cookies. Pipe the outline of the band of Santa's hat with the white, then a half-egg shape below to outline his face.
- 3** Scrape the red icing back into its bowl and about half the white icing into its bowl. Add a little water to each so the icing is thin enough to flow. Spoon some white icing into a bowl and add red colouring to make a pale pink.
- 4** Flood pink into the half-egg shapes. Do the same with the red icing in the hat outline and the white icing in the hat band. Dip a toothpick into the red icing and add cheeks. Add black food colouring to the pink icing and add eyes with a toothpick. Pipe a white beard at the base. Pipe a blob of icing on the top of each hat with a sprinkle. Allow to set.



REINDEER COOKIES

The little ones will love these pretzel antler cookies with peanut chocolate noses to help guide Santa on his way!

- 320g self-raising flour
- 30g unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1 tsp bicarbonate of soda
- 200g caster sugar
- 175g butter
- 3 heaped tbsp golden syrup
- 36 pretzels
- 17 sugar-coated chocolate peanuts plus 1 red one for Rudolph
- 30g white chocolate, broken into pieces
- 30g dark chocolate, broken into pieces

- 1** Preheat the oven to 180°C, gas mark 4. Sift the flour, cocoa powder and bicarbonate of soda into a bowl. Stir in the sugar. In a saucepan, heat the butter and syrup until the butter has melted. Stir the syrup mixture into the flour and whisk in until the dough comes together.
- 2** Divide the dough into 18 pieces and place the mounds on baking sheets, leaving space between them. Press each cookie down to flatten. Bake for 5 minutes, then remove from the oven and press two pretzels into each cookie for the antlers. Using a clean cloth, press down each cookie. Return to the oven and bake for a further 5-7 minutes.
- 3** Remove from the oven and immediately press one chocolate peanut into each cookie for the nose. Leave the cookies to cool on the baking sheets for 5 minutes then, using a spatula, transfer to a wire rack to cool.
- 4** Place the white and dark chocolate into two separate heatproof bowls and rest each bowl over a pan of simmering water. Heat until the chocolate has melted.
- 5** Leave to cool slightly, then spoon into piping bags. Pipe two small circles of white chocolate onto each cookie for eyes, then pipe a smaller dot of dark chocolate onto the white chocolate for the pupils. Leave to cool completely until the chocolate has set. Store in an airtight container.



SWEDISH GINGER COOKIES

Assemble the family on the Sundays of Advent to make these traditional festive treats.

MAKES 50-70

- 550g plain flour, sifted
- 1 tsp bicarbonate of soda
- 1 1/2 tsp ground ginger
- 1 tsp ground cloves
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 1 tsp ground cardamom
- 1/2 tsp ground allspice
- A pinch of salt
- 100g granulated sugar
- 100g soft dark brown sugar
- 150g cubes butter, softened
- 200g golden syrup
- 150ml double cream
- Royal icing to decorate (optional)

- 1** In a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, mix together the flour, bicarbonate of soda, spices, salt and sugars. Add the rest of the ingredients and combine until you have an even dough. Shape the dough into a log, wrap in clingfilm and leave to cool in the fridge at least overnight. Preheat the oven to 200°C, gas mark 6.
- 2** On a flour-dusted surface, roll out the dough to about 2mm thick and use cutters to cut your shapes. Make sure they are thin. Put them on lined baking sheets and bake in batches in a preheated oven for 5 minutes. The cookies should be a darker shade of brown without being burned.
- 3** Remove from the oven and leave to cool before storing in an airtight container. You can decorate the cookies with piped royal icing or, for ease, use icing pens and create whatever patterns you like on the cooled cookies. They will store for up to 5 days in an airtight container.



'Psychologies' readers can buy a copy of *Christmas Cookies* by Hannah Miles for the special price of £6 (RRP £9.99). To order, go to rylandpeters.com and use code 'PSYCHCOOKIES' at checkout. Postage costs may apply. Offer valid until 18 December 2020.

Reader offer