



DORY'S DIARY

DOROTHY SWART
FLESHMAN

The joy, and sorrow, of decorating for Christmas

On the last day of November I put up my artificial Charlie Brown Christmas tree and wound the string of 140 miniature lights through its branches.

It wasn't that I was yet in the mood for Christmas cheer, for I had decided not to bother with decorations this year. I felt old and tired and out of sorts with the world, but I was driven on by the need to join in with my neighbors along the street in sharing what light I had for those who drove by to see the brightness in the night.

My little lights would hardly show through the window but they had to do because I couldn't hang outside strings along the eaves of the house.

Once begun, I continued on with bringing other decorations into the living room. The nativity set with the scene of the holy family, purchased by George and I in 1946 when we were married on Dec. 21, was placed on the hutch where it has been every December regardless of where we have lived. Above was artificial greenery with doves perched on the boughs.

The three kings were placed, traveling across hill and dale above the display case George had built, and he was to be found atop the Matterhorn Mountain in Switzerland where he could look into another country.

Then the collection of 24 nutcracker soldiers lined up in protection across the cabinet that once graced the Wright's Drugstore on downtown Adams Avenue.

Santa Claus, to be traditional, sat in a chair where he could read "Twas the Night Before Christmas" to the toy children sitting on the deacon's bench before him.

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BETWEEN THE ROWS

WENDY SCHMIDT

The signs of the season

Snow on the ground means that the wildlife will be able to keep no secrets. We can see the tracks of dogs and cats and the heart-shape tracks of deer crowding the ground and thinning out. The birds have written messages in their strange script with their feet across porches and windowsills.

Just because we have snow on the ground now, does not mean we'll have a white Christmas. Nothing is ever that certain, but we do have the certainty of dried winter weeds and seed-pods; many of which are pretty. A lot of the weeds have geometric form and are rather attractive in a symmetrical way, like a snowflake.

If you gather a bouquet of different dried weeds and seed heads, they become attractive because of the contrast of different neutral colors of browns and grays. Also different textures of smooth, rough, prickly, soft and shiny and dull. There are towns and areas that have weed festivals, and some weeds sell for high prices.

Birds rely on some weeds to be left there as a source of food for them during the winter. Ragweed is a main source of food for the quail in the Midwest. Coneflower is a favorite of goldfinch as its stems are strong and it stands all winter to enable them to land and feed there. The tiny coneflower seeds are as nourishing and full of oil as the wild sunflower seeds.

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Essential Holiday Baking



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Chewy sugar cookies are an essential part of a holiday cookie selection.

CLASSIC COOKIES

By **Daniel Neman**
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

It's the best week of the year for food writers.

Every holiday season, we run a Let's Eat section devoted (almost) entirely to cookies. We hope the readers look forward to it, because we certainly do.

It's cookies, right? Cookies. Life does not get better. The only question is: Which cookies should we make?

This year, we decided to take a scientific approach to the cookie conundrum. We asked a bunch of our colleagues what kind of cookies speak of the holidays to them. What cookie do they absolutely have to have for it to truly be Christmas?

In our world, this counts as a scientific poll.

Not surprisingly, the results were pretty much what you would expect. Our scientifically selected respondents turn out to crave some of the most popular cookies of the season.

We're talking gingerbread men, sugar cookies, those cookies with a Hershey's Kiss in the middle (but an especially good version). All the classics: haystacks, spritz cookies (it's a German thing) and chocolate chip.

You could argue that chocolate chip cookies aren't particularly related to the holidays. It's not a bad argument, but I have a riposte: They're chocolate chip cookies. Q.E.D.

As it happens, columnist Joe Holleman — he's the one who suggested them — has an excellent recipe for chocolate chip cookies that he worked on and tweaked until he got it to have a crisp outside but a soft center, and also so it does not spread out too much on the tray while baking.

It's just the way he likes it. Now that I've made them, it's just the way I like it, too.

I believe he began with the Toll House recipe, which is in itself perfection. But then he gilded the perfection with a handful of extra steps. So I guess the recipe is perfecter than perfect.

He begins by toasting walnuts or pecans and then grinding them to a near-powder, which he adds to the dough. He also triples the called-for amount of vanilla, melts the butter, stirs the liquid ingredients three times and chills the dough before cooking it.

He tried one and said it was even better than the ones he makes. I was pleased, but then he explained it was better because he didn't have to make it.

If the chocolate chip cookies take a lot of time and effort, the haystacks were the fastest and easiest.

Melt chocolate. Add chow mein noodles, nuts and salt. Let them dry, and serve. They're crispy, chocolatey, salty and nutty. Basically everything you want in a sweet snack.

Gingerbread cookies can be made two ways: thick and chewy or thin and crispy. I prefer thin and crispy, because I like their bite, their crunch, their satisfying snap.



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Sherpa chocolate chip cookies

When I bite the head off a gingerbread man, I want him to know it.

The difference in making the two is fairly small. I just rolled the dough thinner, to one-eighth of an inch, and baked them a bit longer in a slightly cooler oven. I also added a touch more ginger than the recipe originally called for, because I like ginger.

The thin and crispy gingerbread men can also be used as Christmas-tree ornaments to delightful effect.

Sugar cookies can be made two ways, thick and chewy or just as thick and crisp. I prefer thick and chewy because they're so nice and soft and welcoming.

The ones I made are also spectacular (some of our ravenous taste testers liked them the most of all). The recipe comes from "The King Arthur Flour Cookie Companion," and those people know something about making cookies. Or at least sugar cookies.

What makes them so good? I can't quite tell for sure. Maybe it's the use of baking powder and baking soda, to give them just enough rise. Maybe it is the combination of granulated and brown sugars, with extra sweetening from corn syrup. Maybe it is the hint of nutmeg, or just the right amount of vanilla.

Perhaps it is the proportion of all the ingredients mixed together that makes them so flavorful. But if I had to guess, I'd say it's the butter. These cookies use a lot of butter. Butter is pretty much the answer to every culinary question.

Cookies with a Hershey's Kiss in the middle are a standard, but the Chocolate Candy Cane Kiss Cookies I made are a real standout.

The cookies themselves are chocolate, which is an improvement on most of the other versions I have had, and they are softer and chewier, too. I suspect the addition of a small amount of Greek yogurt is the secret to that texture.

And then there is the Kiss itself, which in this case is a peppermint-flavored candy-cane Kiss. The peppermint of the Kiss, combined with the chocolate of the cookie, is a mouth-pleasing mixture that is sheer indulgence.

A colleague with Czech heritage requested that I make spritz cookies, and I'm glad she did. They are nicely buttery (I've heard that butter is the answer to every culinary question, but don't quote me on that) with more

than a hint of almond.

Best of all, they come in fanciful holiday shapes. These treats require a cookie press, which is basically the same idea as a caulking gun, but with almond-flavored dough. You tighten the press, which forces the dough through disks of varying shape. I made Christmas trees, clusters of stars and pin-wheels.

These cookies taste as good as they look. And they look marvelous.

THIN, CRISP GINGERBREAD COOKIES

Yield: About 34 cookies

3 cups all-purpose flour
¾ cup dark brown sugar, packed
¾ teaspoon baking soda
1 tablespoon ground cinnamon
1 tablespoon ground ginger, see note
½ teaspoon ground cloves
½ teaspoon salt
1½ sticks (12 tablespoons) unsalted butter, softened but still cool, cut into 12 pieces
¾ cup molasses
2 tablespoons milk
Royal icing, for decorating

Note: If you want a sharper flavor, use 1 heaping tablespoon of ground ginger.

1. In a food processor, process the flour, brown sugar, baking soda, cinnamon, ginger, cloves and salt until combined, about 10 seconds. Scatter the butter pieces over the flour mixture and process until the mixture is sandy and resembles very fine meal, about 15 seconds. With the machine running, gradually add the molasses and milk; process until the dough is evenly moistened and forms a soft mass, about 10 seconds.

2. Scrape the dough onto a work surface; divide it in quarters. Working with one portion at a time, roll the dough ¼ inch thick between two large sheets of parchment paper. Leaving the dough sandwiched between the parchment layers, stack on a baking sheet and freeze until firm, 15 to 20 minutes.

3. Adjust the oven racks to the upper- and lower-middle positions and heat the oven to 325 degrees. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper or spray them with nonstick cooking spray.

4. Remove 1 dough sheet from the freezer, place on the work surface. Peel off the top parchment sheet and gently lay it back in place. Flip the dough over; peel off and discard second parchment layer. Cut the dough into gingerbread people, transferring shapes to prepared baking sheets with a wide metal spatula, spacing them ¾ inch apart; set the scraps aside. Repeat with the remaining dough until the baking sheets are full.

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