

Molasses makes the ultimate lunchbox cookie

By RICK NELSON

Minneapolis Star Tribune

These impressive, easy-to-make molasses crinkles are a perfect back-to-school treat.

One of the rules of my book club is that the host provides dessert, and one of the joys of my book club is that many of its members are excellent bakers.

Years ago, fellow book clubber and colleague Chris Hewitt was serving cookies, and one of them was a fantastic molasses crinkle. The texture really stuck out: slightly crisped-up on the outside, yet softly chewy on the inside. Another duality? It looked like an everyday cookie jar cookie, but tasted like so much more, exuding a rich molasses bite that tickled the nose before landing on the taste buds.

Molasses crinkles are a lifelong favorite of mine. They were a staple of my mother's baking repertoire, and frequently ended up in the brown paper lunch sacks I carried every day to Palmer Lake Elementary School. Turns out, Chris shares a similar history.

"Everyone in our family loves them," he said. "My sister and I have always called them 'Molasses Shops,' and we still do, which makes no sense. We thought the name on Mom's recipe card said 'shops,' but it's 'snaps.' Which is weird, because they don't snap, they're a soft cookie."

Unlike me — I probably didn't bake a single molasses crinkle during my 20s and 30s — Chris incorporated his mother's recipe into his baking routine.

"I've always made them," he said. "They're so easy, and forgiving. You could throw all the ingredients in a bowl, hit the mixer button and they'd be fine. And they make your house smell so good. Even if you're going to give them all away, they're worth making."

Chris being Chris, he generously shared the recipe. Over the intervening years I've prepared it so many times that I barely need to reference

my splattered and wrinkled handwritten copy.

Since I'm incapable of leaving well enough alone, I've tweaked Judy Hewitt's formula to the point where I wonder if she'd recognize it. (I hope she approves). Her version calls for shortening (turns out, she originally used bacon fat), but I prefer cookies made with butter. I've replaced some of the granulated sugar with dark brown sugar to underline the molasses flavor. Instead of a whole egg I use just the yolk, and if the eggs are small, I'll make it two yolks.

Rather than cinnamon, I've inserted hints of cardamom and allspice. Sometimes I play around with the spice levels, adding more ginger and/or cloves, or giving the pepper mill a few more cranks.

I prefer using a strongly flavored molasses, because they're called molasses crinkles. For this reason I skip the familiar (and, let's be honest, dull) Brer Rabbit brand, and pick up the full-bodied organic molasses from the Whole-some label, available at some supermarkets and most natural foods co-ops. The slightly larger Whole-some bottle is often twice the price of its more familiar competitor, so it's a splurge. But the best baked goods start with the best ingredients.

I also purchase ground spices in the bulk aisle at the co-op; it's cheaper, because you can buy what you need, and the flavor is generally more lively.

Sometimes, I refrigerate the dough overnight. This step helps relax the flour's glutens and dials up the tenderness factor, although it also takes away from the lunchbox cookie genre's no-fuss nature.

On a similar note, this is an excellent work-ahead cookie. Form the dough into balls, arrange them in a single layer, freeze them and then store in the freezer in an airtight container. When you're ready to bake, allow the dough to thaw slightly, roll the dough balls in sugar and bake.

That sugar, by the way, is all the embellish-



Mrs. Hewitt's Molasses Crinkles is the ultimate lunchbox cookie.

Rick Nelson/Minneapolis Star Tribune-TNS

ment this cookie needs. I love how a rustic beauty develops as the tops form their namesake fissures, and the way the sugar twinkles against the copper-tinted dough.

However, I once created a dolled-up version, and the results are worth noting.

The occasion was our department's holiday cookie competition. True to form, I'd completely forgotten about it until the night before. Baking cookies was the last activity that I wanted to do; I'd recently wrapped up the Star Tribune's annual holiday cookie contest and, to be honest, I was cooked out.

Turns out, staging a cookie contest for nearly 20 years creates expectations, including mandatory participation in the office baking competition. Oh, and your entry had better be good. If not, as they say in Texas, you're all hat and no cattle.

I took a quick pantry

inventory and realized that we had all the ingredients for Mrs. Hewitt's Molasses Crinkles. Which was perfect, because my rock-bottom energy level was an ideal fit for this easy-to-prepare recipe.

I knew that, flavor- and texture-wise, I had a contender on my hands, but maybe a festive icing might make it irresistible to the judges' panel. I turned to an easy formula from — where else? — "The Great Minnesota Cookie Book," which features the winning recipes from the first 15 years of the Star Tribune Holiday Cookie Contest.

By the way, that icing recipe was a snap. Combine 1½ cups of powdered sugar with 3 tablespoons of milk (or 3 tablespoons of melted and cooled butter), then whisk until smooth. For a wiletide touch, I stirred in some finely chopped crystallized ginger.

Yeah, I won. Thanks, Mrs. Hewitt.

MRS. HEWITT'S MOLASSES CRINKLES

Makes about 3 dozen cookies.

2 1/4 cups flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 1/2 teaspoon ground ginger
1/2 teaspoon ground cardamom
1/2 teaspoon ground cloves
1/4 teaspoon ground allspice
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1/4 teaspoon salt
3/4 cup (1 1/2 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature
1/2 cup plus 1/3 cup granulated sugar, plus extra for rolling dough
1/3 cup dark brown sugar
1 egg yolk
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/2 cup dark molasses

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees Fahrenheit and line baking sheets with parchment paper.
2. In a large bowl, whisk together the flour, baking soda, ginger, cardamom, cloves, allspice, black pepper and salt, and reserve.
3. In the bowl of an electric

mixer on medium-high speed, beat butter until creamy, about 1 minute. Add granulated sugar and dark brown sugar and beat until light and fluffy, about 2 minutes. Add egg yolk and vanilla extract and beat until thoroughly combined.

4. Reduce speed to low, add molasses and mix until thoroughly incorporated, scraping down sides and bottom of bowl and mixing thoroughly. Add flour mixture in thirds, mixing until just combined. Do not overmix.

5. Place about 3/4 cup granulated sugar into a wide, shallow bowl. Form dough into 1-inch balls, roll in granulated sugar and place 2 inches apart on prepared baking sheets. Bake until cookies are browned and slightly puffy, with cracks in the tops, about 11 minutes, rotating pan halfway through baking (if using a convection oven, check on them at 9 minutes, and if still slightly wet in the cracks, bake an additional 30 seconds). Do not overbake. Remove from oven, cool cookies on baking sheets for about 5 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack to cool completely.

GRILL

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Divide the meat into 4 equal portions; with cupped hands, toss one portion of meat back and forth to form a loose ball.

3. Pat lightly to flatten meat into 3/4-inch thick burger that measures about 4 1/2 inches across. Press the center of the patty down with your fingertips until it is about 1/2-inch thick, creating a well or divot in the center of the patty. Repeat with the remaining portions of meat.

4. Grill the burgers, divot-side up, uncovered and without pressing down on them, until well seared on the bottom, about 2 1/2 minutes. Flip the burgers and continue grilling to the desired doneness, about 2 minutes for rare, 2 1/2 minutes for medium-rare, 3 minutes for medium and 4 minutes for well done.

Per serving: 546 calories; 43 g fat; 19 g saturated fat; 148 mg cholesterol; 36 g protein; 1 g carbohydrate; no sugar; no fiber; 878 mg sodium; 233 mg calcium

— Recipe from "Steaks, Chops, Roasts and Ribs" by the editors of Cook's Illustrated Magazine

MUSTARD LIME STEAKS

Yield: 4 servings



Colter Peterson/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Mustard-Lime Steak right off the barbecue grill.

4 steaks (sirloin, T-bone, ribeye, New York strip or skirt)
1/4 cup dry mustard, such as Colman's
1/4 cup Worcestershire sauce
1 large, juicy lime
Coarse salt
White pepper

1. Place steaks on a platter and sprinkle 2 tablespoons of the dry mustard over them. Pat the steaks with the flat part of a fork to spread the mustard evenly. Sprinkle with 2 tablespoons of the Worcestershire sauce, then squeeze half the lime juice over them. Pat the steaks with the fork. Season generously with salt and pepper.

2. Turn the steaks over and

repeat on the other side. Let the steaks marinate for 15 to 20 minutes while you preheat the grill.

3. Set up the grill for direct grilling, and preheat to high.

4. Brush and oil the grill grate. Place the steaks on the hot grate and grill, turning with tongs, until cooked to taste, 4 to 6 minutes per side for medium-rare. Do not rotate the steaks, or you will knock off the mustard mixture. Transfer to a platter and let rest 3 minutes.

5. Slice the steaks thinly on the diagonal, as you would for London broil. Let the slices marinate in the meat juices for a minute or two, then serve.

Per serving: 808 calories; 55 g fat; 24 g saturated fat; 182 mg cholesterol; 71 g protein; 7 g

carbohydrate; 2 g sugar; 1 g fiber; 960 mg sodium; 55 mg calcium

— Recipe from "The Barbecue! Bible" by Steven Raichlen

GRILLED ASPARAGUS WITH OLIVE OIL AND PARMESAN

Yield: 2 servings

8 fat asparagus spears
1 tablespoon pure olive oil
Salt and pepper
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1/2 lemon
6 thin slices pancetta
1 large egg, hard-cooked and chopped
Fresh Parmesan cheese

1. Prepare a charcoal fire.
2. Toss the asparagus in the pure olive oil, and salt and pepper

them lightly. Grill the asparagus over a medium-hot fire for about 5 minutes, turning the spears until the skin is shriveled and slightly charred all over. Test the asparagus for doneness at its thickest point with the tip of a knife; the asparagus should feel soft in the center. Transfer to warm plates and drizzle with extra-virgin olive oil and juice from 1/2 lemon.

3. Grill the pancetta for several minutes until it renders some of its fat and just begins to crisp.

Coarsely chop the pancetta and strew it over the asparagus while still warm; sprinkle with the chopped egg. Top with thin slices of Parmesan. Serve immediately.

Per serving: 507 calories; 48 g fat; 12 g saturated fat; 133 mg cholesterol; 23 g protein; 8 g carbohydrate; 2 g sugar; 4 g fiber; 1,650 mg sodium; 70 mg calcium

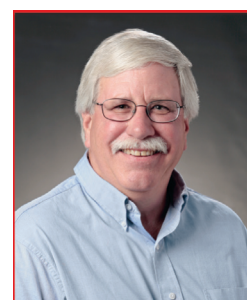
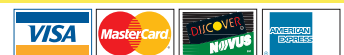
— Recipe from "Chez Panisse Cooking" by Paul Bertolli and Alice Waters



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