

Tony's pastry chef does it her way in new cook(ie)book

By DANIEL NEMAN
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

To the baking world, it's an unthinkable suggestion bordering on blasphemy: When making certain desserts, it's just fine to use imitation vanilla extract.

So says Helen S. Fletcher, the author of "Craving Cookies: The Quintessential American Cookie Book." It may be the best cookie cookbook you will ever see.

Fletcher is the pastry chef at Tony's, one of the highest-rated fine-dining establishments in St. Louis. For more than 20 years, she owned Truffles in University City, a bakery that catered to restaurants, hotels and caterers, and also did a lot of work with weddings. So she knows about baking, even when it comes to imitation vanilla.

"At work, at Tony's... I use vanilla that costs \$400 a gallon," she said, demonstrating in one short sentence the difference between professional bakers and hobbyists.

Even small bottles of what she considers the best tasting, most aromatic vanilla, Tahitian vanilla, can cost \$35. And she doesn't want to price anyone out of the joy of baking.

"My whole mantra is: I want people to bake. I want people to enjoy baking. I want people who have never baked to bake," she said.

And that means using imitation vanilla when the vanilla flavor doesn't stand on its own, such as in recipes that also use a lot of spice or chocolate. She usually uses professional imitation vanilla herself, but she also recommends McCormick's.

Fletcher, 81, has had no formal training as a baker. So she has developed her own way of doing things, tips and tricks and hacks that work wonders but that other bakers don't use.

"Sometimes, when you are trained, you get stuck on the way you are taught or the way the book taught you. Well, I wasn't trained and I didn't have the book," she said.

Her new cookbook, which is self-published, has tricks for baking the



Craving Cookies The Quintessential American Cookie Book by Helen S. Fletcher



Helen S. Fletcher/Contributed Photo

"Craving Cookies: The Quintessential American Cookie Book," by Helen S. Fletcher.

way she bakes.

For instance, she recommends something she calls the double-pan method. When she was baking croissants, she noticed that when the outside were golden brown and perfect, the insides were still undercooked. If she lengthened the cooking time, the interiors would be cooked but the bottoms would be burned.

So she put one baking sheet on top of another, and baked on that. The result was perfect croissants every time — and not just croissants but cookies and other pastries that are made with brown sugar, honey, molasses or chocolate, or that have a lot of butter or spice in them.

Cookies and pastries cooked on a double pan will take a little longer to bake; probably about 10% to 15% beyond the original time.

If you bake something

that sticks to the sides of the pan and is hard to remove, she recommends a very simple solution: Turn the pan upside down over a board or platter and heat the side of the pan with a blow dryer. The brownies or caramels or lemon bars will drop out easily.

"At work, I use a propane (blow torch). I modified it to a blow dryer on high. It just really works for a lot of things. I use it for cheesecakes, anything that needs to be released with heat," she said.

Lemon bars, which she writes "are as American as chocolate chip cookies, and loved just as much," are particularly prone to sticking. As the bars bake, they pull away from the sides of the pan, and when the lemon topping is added it fills the gap and sticks to the pan.

She developed another technique to keep this from happening. She calls it spooning the crust. As

soon as the crust is taken out of the oven, while it is still soft, she goes around the edge with a spoon and gently presses it back up against the sides of the pan.

The idea of using bread flour to make chewy cookies chewier isn't hers alone, but she embraces it fully — while suggesting it is also best when doing so to refrigerate the dough overnight, which allows the flour to fully hydrate.

Nor can she claim credit for the idea of adding corn syrup to make caramel to keep the sugar from granulating (though she did come up with the idea of heating the cream to keep the caramel from temporarily solidifying). And other bakers, too, use a food processor for making some doughs, though doing so seems counterintuitive.

Shortbread, for instance, is "the easiest thing to make in the food processor. You use cold

butter and just cut it into the flour until it's like sand. This way, it comes out of the food processor cold and ready to go," she said.

"Craving Cookies" is Fletcher's second cookbook. The first, "The New Pastry Cook," came out in 1986. Someone has a copy on sale at Amazon for \$253, she said.

"What moron would pay \$253 for a pastry book?" said the writer of that pastry book. "Two hundred fifty-three dollars, and no sense."

The new book, "Craving Cookies," focuses only on American cookies. It was originally going to be twice as long as its 80 recipes, and would include European cookies as well, but she didn't want to have to charge too much for it.

"It wasn't so much the number of recipes as the number of pages," she said.

So a second book, as yet untitled, will come out next year. It will focus on European cookies.

"There's so much to learn. I think that is what I like most about food. There is no end to it; there's always more."

CHOCOLATE-DIPPED SWEET AND SALTED BUTTER COOKIES

Yield: About 35 servings

- 12 tablespoons (1 1/2 sticks, 170 grams) unsalted butter, softened
- 1/2 cup (100 grams, 3 1/2 ounces) granulated sugar
- 1 large egg yolk
- 2 teaspoons almond extract
- 1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract, preferably Tahitian
- 1 7/8 cups (260 grams, 9 1/4 ounces or 2 cups minus 2 tablespoons) all-purpose flour
- 6 ounces (170 grams) semisweet chocolate, coarsely chopped
- 1 1/2 tablespoons vegetable shortening
- 1/2 cup sanding sugar, see note
- Sea salt to taste

Note: Sanding sugar is a coarse sugar that will not melt in the oven. It can be found at some grocery stores, big-box stores, kitchen supply stores and online.

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line several rimmed baking sheets with parchment paper. Set aside.

2. Beat the butter and sugar together until very light. Add the egg yolk and beat until completely combined. Add almond and vanilla extracts, and beat well. Add the flour all at once and mix until the dough comes together in a ball.

3. If using cookie cutters, divide the dough in half (290 grams or 10 ounces each). If it is too soft to work with, refrigerate for about 30 minutes. Place between 2 sheets of waxed paper and roll with a rolling pin to about 1/4-inch thickness, and cut out the cookies. Repeat with the second half of the dough. Gather the pieces that are left over and reroll as necessary.

4. If rolling and slicing, divide the dough in half as directed in step 3. Roll each half into a 10-inch log. Wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate until firm. Slice about 1/4-inch thick. (The logs may be frozen, thawed and sliced as needed. Bake as directed).

5. Place cookies about 1 1/2 inch apart on the prepared baking sheets. Bake for 7 minutes, then rotate the pan and bake for 6 to 7 more minutes if very small or 10 to 12 minutes if larger, until lightly browned. Transfer to a wire rack to cool.

6. While cookies cool, prepare the quick-tempering chocolate. Mix chocolate and shortening together in a bowl. Melt by either placing the bowl over a pot of simmering water and stirring until combined or by placing bowl in microwave and heating in 10-second bursts, stirring between each one, until combined.

7. In a separate bowl, mix sanding sugar with salt to taste. You want to be able to taste the salt, but the sugar should be the predominant flavor.

8. Holding a cookie upside-down, dip the top half of the cookie into the chocolate. Sprinkle with the sugar/salt mixture. Allow the chocolate to set firmly at room temperature.

Per serving: 60 calories; 3 g fat; 2 g saturated fat; 8 mg cholesterol; 1 g protein; 7 g carbohydrate; 4 g sugar; 1 g fiber; 3 mg sodium; 2 mg calcium

Recipe from "Craving Cookies: The Quintessential American Cookie Book" by Helen S. Fletcher

MAMMEN

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to the Sanborn Maps, were a drug store, cigar store and club room.

The first tenant in the corner space was identified as a drug and stationery store. M. Blumauer was listed as having a drug store in the Rogers Block Building in the 1893 City Directory. This was Solomon M. Blumauer, a young man who, with his parents Joseph and Mary and brother Isaac, traveled from their home in New York to Florida in the 1860s. By the late 1880s the family had migrated to Washington Territory. It was about this time that La Grande came on their radar and young Sol set up a drug store. He wasn't here very long before he joined the rest of the family who had moved to Portland. Over time the Blumauer & Frank Drug Company, a large Northwest drug company, was born.

Next door at 1203 Adams was a vacant space and then the store selling cigars and candy, owned

by J. Van Buren and W. Griffin. The last storefront of the building was occupied by the La Grande Athletic Club.

Elsewhere in the building in 1893 were the businesses of W. J. Winkead's Cigar Store and Poil and Sullivan's Barber shop.

The 1903 City Directory showed some changes and the corner store, owned by T. N. Murphy, was now selling hardware and crockery. As stated above Sol Blumauer had not remained in La Grande very long so it was likely in the early 1900s that Murphy, a machinist, took over the location. He had not been in business long when he became Union County State Representative in 1903. Unfortunately, in December of that same year, Thomas J. Murphy died. Mrs. Murphy took over the store for a short period and later became quite a businesswoman, buying land and building houses. She was also one of three women owners of the Elite Theatre in the early 1900s.

The 1903 Sanborn Maps show that the vacant

spot had been filled by Anderson & Meyers Barbbershop. The cigar and candy merchants Van Buren and Griffin were still in operation. The Athletic Club had moved out and a drug store owned by Henry and Robertson had moved into 1205 Adams.

Over the years the usage of the building caused the interior to be remodeled and spaces enlarged or diminished to meet the current needs. Some of the spaces remained basically the same and thus the addresses did also. Early on there were locations from 1201 to 1205. Later the addresses changed to include 1207 in this building. The address change over the years makes it difficult to have an exact address for the comings and goings of various parts of the building. The following is close to accurate as possible as to the conformation at the time.

As years passed there were numerous occupants on the lower floor of the building. 1201 Adams was the address for an investment company, Equitable Savings Bank, Wagner's Hardware, Campbell's

Clothing, La Grande Electric and the Top Shop. Currently it is the home of JUB Engineers Inc.

1203 Adams also had a variety of tenants. During the 1930s it housed La Grande Music, and Floyd's Barber Shop. In the '40s, Hackman's Grocery and the Club Cafe were located here. The '50s were dominated by Homer's Barber Shop, which also offered hearing aids and Bibles. Royal Cafe moved in during the 1960s. Currently this is the location of Fairway Independent Mortgage Corporation.

Many needs were served over the years at 1205 Adams, the last address in the Rogers Block. It has held church services, Zion's and Bak-

er's menswear shops, a law office, and Wright Drug Store which became Red Cross Drug Store in 1912. At some time the stairway to the upstairs Phoenix apartments was given the address of 1205. Making this last storefront of the building, the current home of John Howard Realty, with the address of 1207 Adams.

The second floor also holds a long list of occupants including the Elks in the early 1900s. The Observer reported that early on there were as many as 75 members and they "climbed the stairs next to the Steward's Opera House and walked down the hall to the lodge room." It also provided offices for doctors, dentists, lawyers

and notaries, and meeting rooms for various organizations. Currently it offers residential apartments.

The Rogers Building has also undergone a number of facade changes over the years. Each time it was "modernized" to meet the facade design of the era. After one of the renovations it was renamed the Phoenix Building. Although some of its distinctive features have been reawakened, it has never been restored to its original majestic self.

Keep looking up! Enjoy!

Ginny Mammen has lived in La Grande for more than 50 years and enjoys sharing her interest in the history of people, places and buildings.

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