

Festive French toast always a favorite with kids

By **GRETCHEN MCKAY**
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

This French toast recipe is both festive and extremely easy to prepare. Thanks to a homemade, honey-kissed strawberry syrup that speaks to the arrival of spring berries, it's also sure to be a crowd-pleaser, especially with kids.

I used brioche, a light and butter-rich French bread that tastes like a cross between a croissant and bread. But you could also use challah or plain-old white bread. It's gently stuffed with a creamy mix of mascarpone and diced fresh strawberries, then dipped in a frothy batter of eggs and milk infused with a touch of cinnamon before being toasted to a golden brown in a frying pan.

I paired the toast with homemade pork sausage breakfast patties, which can be made a day ahead if you want to speed up prep.

If you use pre-sliced bread that's too thin for stuffing, no worries: simply double the amount of bread and spread the filling between two slices like a sandwich.



Gretchen McKay/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

French toast stuffed with sweet cheese and topped with a jammy strawberry sauce is perfect for a special occasion like a brunch.

1 pound plus 3 large fresh strawberries, rinsed and diced, divided

**Pinch of salt
Pinch of cinnamon, optional
Butter for pan**

For French toast
8 thick slices brioche, preferably day-old
8 ounces mascarpone cheese, softened to room temperature
1/2 cup whole milk plus 1 teaspoon, divided
2 tablespoons sugar, divided
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
4 large eggs

For sausage patties
1 pound ground pork
1 teaspoon each minced fresh thyme, rosemary and sage
1 clove garlic, minced
Large pinch of salt
Pinch red pepper flakes (optional)
2 teaspoons light brown sugar
Prepare strawberry topping: In a large pan, melt butter and on-

ion over medium heat until evenly melted. Add 1 pound strawberries and cook until heated through, crushing every so often with a fork, and berries break down into a sauce, about 10 minutes. Taste; if it doesn't seem sweet enough, add a little sugar. Lower heat, and keep warm until ready to serve.

Prepare sausage: In large bowl, combine ground pork with seasonings with your hands until well combined. Divide pork

mixture into 8 equal-sized balls. Using damp hands, gently press balls into uniform patties. With your thumb, slightly depress the center of each patty, pushing the extra meat toward the edges. (This will help the patty cook flat instead of puffing up.) Set aside in fridge until ready to cook.

Prepare French toast: Cut a horizontal slit about 2 inches long into the bottom of each bread slice to create a pocket, being careful not to cut all the

way through to the top. In a medium bowl, whisk together the softened mascarpone with remaining 3 chopped strawberries, 1 teaspoon sugar, 1 teaspoon vanilla and 1 teaspoon milk. It should be smooth and creamy.

Transfer the cheese mixture to a pastry bag or a zip-top bag with a corner snipped off. Working one piece at a time, place the tip of the bag into the slit in the bread slice and fill the bread with about 1 tablespoon of cream cheese, then gently smooth it inside the pocket with your fingers. Repeat with remaining slices, then set aside while you cook the sausage.

Heat a nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Cook the sausage patties for 2 minutes on each side, or until brown and crispy and cooked through. Set aside and cover with foil to keep warm while you make the French toast.

In a second bowl, whisk together eggs, milk, remaining sugar, salt and pinch of cinnamon, if using.

Coat a non-stick skillet with a thin layer of butter. Place it over medium-low heat until the butter begins to foam and sizzle.

Dip the bread slices, one at a time, into the egg mixture, allowing each side to soak up some of the mixture. Place the coated slices directly into the hot pan. Cook until the bottom is golden brown, about 3 to 4 minutes, then flip and cook another 2-3 minutes on the other side. Be careful not to crowd the pan or the toast will stick together.

Transfer to plate and keep warm while you repeat with remaining bread, adding more butter to the pan as needed.

Serve with strawberry topping and breakfast sausage patties.

Serves 4.

— Gretchen McKay

STRAWBERRY STUFFED FRENCH TOAST WITH HOMEMADE SAUSAGE

For strawberry topping
2 tablespoons butter
2 tablespoons honey

Beer with Girl Scout cookies? Some gimmicks actually work.

By **JOSH NOEL**
Chicago Tribune

CHICAGO — The idea of pairing beer with Girl Scout cookies has been around a few years, and it always struck me as largely ridiculous. And not the good ridiculous — the gimmicky ridiculous. The only thing gimmickier, it seemed, was pairing beer with Halloween candy (which is also a thing).

I didn't doubt the merit of beer coexisting with Girl Scout cookies; beer is remarkably versatile alongside food, whether sweet or savory, haute or street.

The idea is just so ... gimmicky.

But, hey, some gimmicks work. And plenty of breweries and beer writers have embraced the intersection of Girl Scout cookies and beer. Even craft beer trade group the Brewers Association has weighed in with a thorough guide to such pairings. (A gooeey Samoa alongside a malty doppelbock does sound delicious.)

With Girl Scout cookie season upon us once again, at least three Chicago breweries have developed pairing events this year: Sketchbook Brewing and Ravinia Brewing earlier this month, and Logan Square's Pilot Project Brewing on Thursday. I put my fuddy-duddiness aside and gave it a try, for the sake of journalism.

Girl Scout cookies are good. Beer is good. So why not?

On a warm spring Sunday afternoon, I headed to Sketchbook's Skokie taproom, which offered its pairings for \$14 — four 5-ounce pours with a small plastic bag stuffed with four different Girl Scout cookies. The bartender handed me a wooden tray with four short



E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune-TNS

Girl Scout cookie and beer pairings.

round glasses and the bag of cookies that I carried to the beer garden.

It didn't take long to be won over, and that's because the first pairing was flawless: the Girl Scouts' Lemon-Ups cookie with Sketchbook's witbier. It was a combination Sketchbook co-owner Cesar Marron told me the brewery was excited to feature as soon as it began planning the event. I could see why.

The cookie, introduced in 2020, is a gem unto itself, boasting bright lemon mingling with dueling textures: the crunch of the cookie along with a silky lemon glaze. The beer, a tweaked version of the Belgian classic, is similarly well built: a spry wheat beer brewed with coriander and orange, lemon and lime peels.

I sipped the bright, zesty beer, let the flavors sit for a moment in my mouth, then bit into the sweet lemon crunch of the Lemon-Ups. The combination dazzled brightly. Then back to

the beer, which seemed to take on different character; after the cookie, the coriander's herbal nature popped. They were wonderful complements.

Next up was Insufficient Clearance, a 5% IPA, with the Girl Scout's Trefoils, a no-frills shortbread cookie. Like many IPAs, the beer has an expressively bright citrus-forward note with a muscular showing of balancing bitterness. Shortbread, as virtually everyone knows from childhood, is not the most expressive cookie — its appeal lies in its simplicity, crunch and buttery sweetness.

I was confused by the pairing before tasting it, but it soon became clear; some pairings, such as the Lemon-Ups and witbier, work as complements. Others work as counterpoints; that's what this one was, the beer's fruity bitterness cleared by the cookie's crunchy sweetness. It wasn't a flavor journey like the previous pairing. But it worked all the same.

Next was a pairing featured on the Brewers Association website: Sketchbook's Illustrator doppelbock with a Samoa. As everyone knows — and surely this will not be a controversial sentiment — Samoas are the kings of Girl Scout cookies. It just so happens that doppelbock is one of the great unheralded beer styles, at least in mainstream American circles; its malty backbone is accented with notes of dark fruit and tobacco, often followed by a dry finish that keeps the beer light on the palate.

No surprise: The combination was aces. Alongside the Samoa's creamy caramel-chocolate-coconut delectability, Illustrator performed a neat trick of both complementing the cookie with its sweetness, while contrasting with that tobacco wrinkle and the dry finish.

Last was the most obvious pairing: Sketchbook's dry Irish stout with a Thin Mint.

I love dry Irish stout and I love Thin Mints, but this was the least interesting, the roast of the beer becoming lost in the mint of the cookie. But it still worked fine: it was, after all, a Thin Mint and 5 ounces of dry Irish stout.

At best, the pairings were towering; at worst, they were still tasty. I was won over.

Perhaps most fun about such pairing events is that no two breweries will do it the same.

Ravinia Brewing paired peanut butter sandwich cookie Do-Si-Do with a chocolate-cherry-vanilla stout; Samoa with a hazy IPA; Lemon-Ups with an imperial IPA; and, in what sounds particularly inspired, a barrel-aged barleywine with Tagalongs, a crispy vanilla cookie topped with peanut butter and coated in chocolate. Pilot Project will employ its own vision, too, including two big, flavored stouts and a lager in its event Thursday.

It's also easy enough to do at home, whether pairing a few beers with one cookie — say, Allagash White, Revolution Brewing's Freedom Lemonade and Odell Brewing's Drumroll Hazy Pale Ale with Lemon-Ups — or several cookies with one versatile and dessert-ready beer, such as Left Hand Brewing's Milk Stout. That Brewer's Association article is also a good resource.

Mary Swabel, Pilot Project's director of hospitality, said she had never heard of pairing beer with Girl Scout cookies until a taproom manager said another brewery where he worked did it and sold out the room. She didn't hesitate to sit down with Pilot Project's head brewer, Glenn Allen, to figure out pairings.

They landed on pairing Hip-Hops and R&Brew, a pale ale from Funkytown Brewery, with Lemon-Ups; Tolo Noche dark Mexican-style lager with Thin Mints; Cosimo tiramisu stout — made with vanilla, cacao, cinnamon and coffee — with Samoas; and Kadak chai stout, made by Pilot Project for Azadi Brewing, paired with Tagalongs.

"The cinnamon and the peanut butter really hit the spot for us," Swabel said of the final pairing.

Swabel said social media response and sales, via online ticketing (\$20) have been strong enough to begin thinking about future versions of the event, which could include tailoring beers to specific cookies.

I am officially converted. Pairing Girl Scout cookies with beer is still ridiculous, but it's the good kind — the "that's fun and silly, but it has some merit" version. I will, however, steadfastly hold out against Halloween candy.

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