

Royal Icing

Ideal for decorating cookies, royal icing dries quickly and can be tinted with food coloring. You can use the icing to attach decorative candies, colored sugars and small ornaments to the cookies. It's a good idea to flavor the icing with a few drops of vanilla extract or fresh lemon juice.

In the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with the whisk attachment, beat the egg whites, confectioners' sugar, cream of tartar and salt on medium-low speed until blended. Add the vanilla or lemon juice, increase the speed to medium-high, and continue beating until stiff peaks form and the mixture is nearly triple in volume, 7 to 8 minutes.

Remove the bowl from the mixer, cover tightly with plastic wrap and store at room temperature until ready to use, up to 6 hours. Makes 5 to 6 cups.

Williams-Sonoma Kitchen

Vanilla Wafers

Once these logs of vanilla dough have been chilled, they can be quickly and easily sliced into perfectly shaped thin, round wafers. You can also tightly wrap the logs and freeze them for up to 2 months, then thaw them, still wrapped, in the refrigerator overnight, and slice and bake them the next morning. Crystal sugar, toasted nuts or chocolate chips can be pressed onto the tops of the cookies before they are baked.

To make the dough by hand, in a large bowl, combine the butter, sugar and salt and beat with a wooden spoon until smooth. Add the egg yolks and vanilla and stir until blended. Add the flour and mix until incorporated and a smooth dough forms.

To make the dough with an electric mixer, in the mixer bowl, combine the butter, sugar and salt and beat on medium speed until smooth. Reduce the speed to low, add the egg yolks and vanilla and beat until blended. Add the flour and beat until incorporated and a smooth dough forms.

Divide the dough into 4 equal portions. Roll out each portion into a log 7 inches long and about 1½ inches in diameter. Wrap the logs in plastic wrap and refrigerate until firm, at least 2 hours.

Preheat an oven to 350°F. Line 3 rimless baking sheets with parchment paper.

Using a sharp knife, cut each unwrapped log crosswise into slices ¼ inch thick. Place the cookies 1 inch apart on the prepared baking sheets.

Bake the cookies, 1 sheet at a time, until the edges and bottoms are golden, 12 to 15 minutes. Let the cookies cool on the baking sheets for 5 minutes, then transfer them to wire racks and let cool completely. Store in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 5 days. Makes about 65 cookies.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *Essentials of Baking*, by Cathy Burgett, Elinor Klivans & Lou Seibert Pappas (Oxmoor House, 2003).

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Ingredients for Royal Icing

3 egg whites, at room temperature

4½ cups confectioners' sugar

½ tsp. cream of tartar

Pinch of salt

A few drops of vanilla extract or fresh lemon juice (optional)

Ingredients for Vanilla Wafers

16 Tbs. (2 sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature

½ cup sugar

¼ tsp. salt

2 egg yolks

1 Tbs. vanilla extract

2 cups all-purpose flour

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Cutting Out and Baking Cookies

- Remove the dough from the refrigerator and let it stand for about 30 minutes so it will be easier to roll out. (The dough should still be cool to the touch when you begin rolling.)

- Use very little flour when you first roll out the dough; if you add too much, the dough may become tough.

- Using the proper rolling pin can make a difference. Marble and silicone pins with a cool stainless interior help the dough stay cool. Let the weight of the pin do the work; you should not have to push down to roll out the dough.

- Let the dough rest for a moment before making another pass with the rolling pin; giving the dough time to rest also prevents the cookies from shrinking.

- To get the greatest number of cookies, begin cutting the rolled-out dough from the edge and work your way to the middle, trying not to waste space as you cut. Cookie dough should be rolled out no more than two times; otherwise, the dough becomes tough and the baked cookies will be hard to eat.

- If you are having trouble transferring large cookie cutouts to the baking sheets, try this technique: Roll out the dough to the desired thickness, then roll all the dough onto the rolling pin and roll out onto the baking sheet. Cut out the cookie shapes directly on the sheet, then remove the excess dough from around the cutouts.

- Try to bake similar-sized cookies together. If you combine large and small cookies on the same baking sheet, the small ones may burn while the large ones are underbaked.

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WILLIAMS-SONOMA

Technique Class: Baking Series: Cookies

Nothing is more warm and inviting than the aroma of freshly baked cookies. Whether cookies are simple and basic or elaborate and detailed, the same principles apply. This class is designed to simplify cookie baking and decorating—soon you'll be whipping up home-baked treats with the confidence of a professional chef. Have fun, be creative and happy baking!

Basic Cookie Making

Baking, unlike cooking, is more exacting. Recipes must be followed precisely to ensure that the final product turns out correctly each time. Always use fresh ingredients. If your flour has been in your pantry for a long time and was not stored in an airtight container, the flour can absorb moisture, especially if you live in a damp environment; moist flour can affect the final outcome of your cookies.

These tips will help you have a great cookie-baking experience every time:

- If you have time, it is best to make the cookie dough in advance and refrigerate it for at least 2 hours or even better, overnight. (Giving the dough time to rest makes it easier to roll out and cut.) Bar cookies are an exception; they should nearly always be baked immediately after mixing because the batter will deflate if left to sit for any length of time.
- Have all the ingredients and utensils, such as measuring cups and spoons, mixing bowls and silicone spatulas, close at hand. This called *mise en place*, a French culinary term that means everything is in its place and ready to use.
- Have all the ingredients at room temperature. The ingredients will mix together more evenly, minimizing lumps in the dough. To quickly bring eggs to room temperature, place the whole eggs (still in their shells) in a small bowl and pour warm water over them. (Cold eggs may cause the cookie dough to break and separate.)
- If you want to use a different-flavored extract than the one called for, such as orange instead of almond, use the same quantity specified in the original recipe.
- When a recipe says to cream the butter and sugar, either using a stand mixer or a handheld mixer, you are softening the butter and incorporating air into it as well as the sugar; this gives the final product a lighter consistency.
- Add the room-temperature eggs to the other ingredients one at a time, incorporating each egg completely before adding the next.

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Cutting Out and Baking Cookies

- When baking successive batches with one baking sheet, let the sheet cool to room temperature before placing more cookie dough on it. On a warm sheet, the dough would immediately begin to melt, distorting the cookies' shapes, thinning their edges and altering their texture. If possible, have at least three baking or cookie sheets on hand so you can bake and rotate the sheets without ever having to use one that's still warm.

- After removing a baking sheet from the oven, let it cool on a wire rack for 5 minutes. (This allows the cookies to firm up.) Then, using a spatula, transfer each cookie to a rack to cool completely before icing and decorating.

Ingredients for Peanut Butter Bar Cookies

1 cup all-purpose flour

1 cup rolled oats

½ tsp. baking soda

¼ tsp. salt

8 Tbs. (1 stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature

1 cup firmly packed brown sugar

½ cup creamy or chunky peanut butter

1 egg, at room temperature

1 tsp. vanilla extract

Confectioners' sugar for dusting

- Sift the dry ingredients (unless your recipe specifically says not to) before adding them to the butter, sugar and egg mixture. This prevents lumps from forming in the dough.
- Always preheat the oven. It's easy to overbake cookies if the oven has not been preheated. Use an oven thermometer to tell if your oven is running hot or cold. Some baking issues, like this one, are simple to fix, so make sure your oven has an accurate temperature.
- Use high-quality ingredients to ensure exceptionally flavorful cookies. Purchase real, not imitation, extract. Premium chocolate produces better-tasting cookies with a smoother chocolate finish.

Rolled, Refrigerated and Pressed Cookies

Obviously, cookie recipes will include different ingredients, but the same basic techniques for making the dough apply, whatever the recipe:

- If you are making rolled or dropped cookies, you can use a tablespoon measure or a small ice cream scoop for a more uniform and professional look.
- Place the cookies about 2 inches apart on the baking sheet, as these cookies tend to spread more than rolled cookies.
- Refrigerated cookies, also known as icebox cookies, are usually shaped into a round or squared-off log of dough. They can then be tightly rolled in parchment paper and placed in the refrigerator to chill. After 2 hours, you simply slice the dough into even thicknesses and bake.

Peanut Butter Bar Cookies

Use your favorite type of peanut butter, either creamy or chunky, to make these delicious bars.

Preheat an oven to 350°F. Grease an 8-inch square baking pan with butter, then line it with parchment paper, letting it hang over 2 sides.

In a bowl, combine the flour, oats, baking soda and salt and whisk until well blended. Set aside.

In a large bowl, using an electric mixer, beat together the butter, brown sugar and peanut butter on medium speed until creamy, about 3 minutes. Turn off the mixer and scrape down the sides of the bowl with a rubber spatula. Add the egg and vanilla and beat well. Turn off the mixer and add the flour-oat mixture. Beat on low speed just until blended.

Using the rubber spatula, scrape the batter into the pan and spread it evenly. Bake until the top of the cookie is golden and looks firm, 25 to 30 minutes. Transfer the pan to a wire rack and let cool completely. Lift the cookie from the pan, dust it with confectioners' sugar and cut it into 1-by-4-inch bars. Makes 16 bars.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *Sweet Treats*, by Carolyn Beth Weil (Simon & Schuster, 2006).

Coconut Shortbread Cookies with Creamy Butter Frosting

To store the cookies, stack undecorated ones in an airtight plastic or metal container and store at room temperature for up to 1 week. Place decorated cookies in a single layer in a covered foil-lined cardboard container, such as a cake box, and store at room temperature for up to 3 days.

To make the cookies, in the bowl of a food processor, pulse the flour, granulated sugar, coconut, lemon zest and salt until blended. Add the butter and process in short pulses, just until the ingredients form a ball.

Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and shape into a ball. Divide the dough in half and place each half between 2 large sheets of waxed paper. Roll out each portion to form a 10-inch round about ⅛ inch thick. Keeping the rounds between the waxed paper, stack them on a baking sheet and refrigerate until firm, at least 2 hours or up to 3 days; or freeze, well wrapped, up to 1 month.

Position a rack in the lower third of an oven and preheat to 325°F. Line 2 large baking sheets with parchment paper.

Working with 1 round of dough at a time, peel off the top sheet of waxed paper, replace it loosely on top and flip the dough over. Peel off and discard the second sheet of paper.

Using assorted cookie cutters, cut out shapes and place them about ½ inch apart on the prepared baking sheets. Gather the scraps and refrigerate. (If desired, decorate the cookies with the decorative sugars prior to baking. Otherwise, bake the cookies unadorned, then frost and decorate them after they have cooled.)

Bake the cookies, one sheet at a time, until they are no longer shiny, are just ivory colored and feel slightly firm to the touch, 12 to 15 minutes. Transfer the baking sheet to a wire rack and let cool for about 5 minutes. Using a metal spatula, transfer the cookies to the rack and let cool completely. Repeat with the remaining dough and scraps.

To make the frosting, in a bowl, using an electric mixer, beat the butter, confectioners' sugar and vanilla on medium speed until smooth and blended. Stir in 1 drop of food coloring at a time until the desired shade is reached.

To decorate the cookies, spread the frosting over the top of a cookie and decorate with the sugars and icing pens.

To make cookie sandwiches, choose 2 identically shaped cookies and spread 1 to 2 Tbs. frosting evenly over one of the cookies. Center the other cookie on the frosted one and gently press together. Decorate the top cookie with frosting, sugars and icing pens. Makes 14 to 16 large cookies.

Adapted from *Sweet Miniatures*, by Flo Braker (Chronicle Books, 2000).

Ingredients for Coconut Shortbread Cookies with Creamy Butter Frosting

For the cookies:

3 cups all-purpose flour

⅔ cup granulated sugar

½ cup unsweetened medium-shred coconut

2 tsp. finely grated lemon zest

½ tsp. salt

20 Tbs. (2½ sticks) unsalted butter, at room temperature, cut into ½-inch pieces

Decorative sugars and icing pens

For the frosting:

8 Tbs. (1 stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature

1½ cups sifted confectioners' sugar

2 tsp. vanilla extract

2 to 4 drops food coloring