

Easy as Pie

FOOLPROOF RECIPES TO SWEETEN THE SEASON

BY KATE PARHAM KORDSMEIER



MAKE A TRADITION

A treasured baked treat helps to signify a special time of year.

JAMIE LOTHRIDGE/MY BAKING ADDICTION



Thank the culinary gods for Pinterest; the site has given even novice bakers and cooks the courage — and the vast recipe collection — to attempt dishes previously thought to be out of their league.

Unfortunately, there's a reason #pinterestfail, a widely used hashtag to call out epic baking failures, exists. But don't get discouraged — we've called in top baking bloggers, a cookbook author and pastry chefs to help you pull off this holiday baking season.

When it comes to holiday baking, one ingredient always seems to be top of mind: pumpkin.

Pumpkin pie is great to fall back on when nothing else is in season, says Michelle Lopez, blogger and photographer at Hummingbird High (hummingbirdhigh.com), a site she first launched to record her baking attempts. Her go-to holiday recipe is a pumpkin pie with crème fraîche swirl and speculoos crust.

Jamie Lothridge, the blogger behind My Baking Addiction (mybakingaddiction.com), can relate. Her holiday darling dessert is a pumpkin crunch cake. "The recipe has been a part of our holiday traditions for as long as I can remember."

This is perhaps the first rule of holiday baking — keep things simple and familiar. "If everyone loves Auntie Irene's thumbprint cookies, make them," says Lothridge. "But don't be afraid to put a modern spin on some of your favorites as well."

Alice Medrich, pastry chef and author of eight cookbooks, including *Sinfully Easy Delicious Desserts* and *Chewy Goey Crispy Crunchy Melt-in-Your Mouth Cookies*, agrees: "Pick tried-and-true recipes to reduce stressful surprises." Her favorites: her mother's no-peeling-required apple crisp, a gluten-free dark and spicy pumpkin loaf and ginger cookies.

Of course, another holiday classic is versatile gingerbread.

"My recipe for gingerbread with lemon icing will be your best friend for the holidays," assures Meredith Tomason, pastry chef and founder of RareSweets, a bakery based in Washington, D.C.

TIPS FOR FAIL-PROOF SWEET TREATS:

USE PARCHMENT PAPER

Not only does baking on parchment paper make for easy cleanup, it's also a trick of the trade when it comes to baking cookies in bulk. While two parchment paper-lined baking pans are in the oven with cookies, scoop more cookie dough onto parchment paper on the counter, says Medrich. "As soon as the first cookies are done, slide parchment with hot cookies onto cooling racks, then slide fresh sheets of parchment loaded with dough onto the hot pans and put them into the oven immediately. You do not have to cool cookie sheets between batches so long as you follow these steps."

PRESENTATION COUNTS

To create a beautiful dessert display, Tomason reminds us that the eye is drawn to color, height and variety. So display items on platters with varying heights and use pops of color to gain attention. "It's also better to display more than less — a big pile of cookies is certainly going to get people grabbing at the plate, as opposed to a couple cookies on a small plate, so pile high." »

PUMPKIN CRUNCH CAKE

By Jamie Lothridge, blogger at My Baking Addiction

INGREDIENTS

- 1 15-ounce can pumpkin puree
- 1 12-ounce can evaporated milk
- 4 large eggs
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup packed light brown sugar
- 2 tsp. pure vanilla extract
- 1 T. pumpkin pie spice
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 box yellow cake mix
- 1 cup chopped Fisher pecans
- 1 cup unsalted butter, melted

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Butter a 9x13-inch baking pan.

In a large bowl, whisk together the pumpkin puree, evaporated milk, eggs, sugars, vanilla, pumpkin pie spice and salt until well combined and smooth.

Pour mixture into prepared pan and spread into an even layer.

Sprinkle dry cake mix evenly over the pumpkin mixture and use your hands to gently press it into the batter.

Sprinkle the top of the cake with chopped pecans and evenly drizzle the melted butter over the entire cake.

Bake in preheated oven for 40 minutes. At this point, check your cake. If the top is becoming too brown, cover the cake with foil. Continue baking an additional 10-20 minutes or until set.

Remove pan to a wire rack to cool completely. Chill for a few hours before serving.

If desired, top with whipped cream and chopped pecans before serving.

PREP IN ADVANCE

Do as much as you can, as far in advance as you can, says Tomason. “Start a month or three ahead of the holidays by making and freezing breads and cakes. For cookies, freeze the dough (either pre-scooped or shaped into logs for slice-and-bake), rather than fully baked cookies, which saves freezer space and gets you freshly baked cookies — and the aroma thereof — when you need them,” adds Medrich. She also recommends baking cookies that improve with age, like butter or meringue cookies — they’ll keep for a couple months in airtight containers. “Then, the night before your big celebration, measure out ingredients and find pans and equipment for every recipe before you go to bed.” The day of, says Lopez, “just breathe, have a glass of wine, and know it’s not the biggest deal in the world if your dessert doesn’t turn out the way it’s supposed to — most home-baked goods are better quality than anything you can buy in the store.”

GET ORGANIZED

“Lists are essential for holiday baking, from grocery lists to menus and baking schedules,” says Lothridge. Tomason seconds that notion: “Make a list of everything you need to prepare, purchase and organize before a holiday event. From there, you can break down how and when you wish to get things done, and ensure that it all happens according to plan.”

BE EXACT

“Baking is not as forgiving as cooking, as small changes can make startling differences in results,” says Medrich. “I always follow the recipe exactly as written, at least the first time I make it.”

MIND YOUR BUTTER

“A lot of baking has to do with butter and how you treat butter,” says Tomason. The first rule: Check whether the recipe calls for unsalted or salted butter (most usually call for unsalted). Next, make sure you allow your butter to come to room temperature before you begin creaming. “This will ensure proper mixing and no lumps,” says Tomason. She also recommends scraping down the sides and bottom of your bowl to ensure even mixing and proper air incorporation.

DON'T OVERMIX

“Always use the appliance appropriate for the recipe, never one that is more powerful than necessary,” cautions Medrich. “Many cookies are ruined by overmixing, and sometimes a bowl and spoon makes better cookie dough than a mixer.” Tomason adds: “Overmixing batter or dough will cause your dough to be tough and your baked goods to lose their tenderness, so once the dry ingredients are no longer visible in the wet ingredients, turn your mixer off.”

READ DIRECTIONS FIRST

Read the recipe in full before you start baking, Lopez says. “There have been many times where I’ve started following a recipe, only to realize that one of the ingredients needed extra prep or there’s a step requiring overnight proofing or chilling.”

TESTING IS KEY

Never attempt a new recipe without testing it once before the big day, adds Lothridge. “There’s nothing worse than whipping up a #pinterestfail hours before your guests arrive.” ●

FAIL-PROOF KITCHEN TOOLS

Our experts share their favorite must-have kitchen appliances and gadgets:



“I would be lost without my **KitchenAid stand mixer** (\$459.99, kitchenaid.com),” says Michelle Lopez. If you don’t have one, take advantage of Black Friday discounts.



“I can’t rave enough about my **Breville smart oven** (\$249.99, brevilleusa.com),” says Jamie Lothridge. “It’s the perfect countertop oven that can bake up perfect cookies and casseroles all season long.”



“You can do everything right with your recipe, but if your oven thermometer is off by 20 degrees, you will certainly have a #pastryfail,” says Meredith Tomason. She recommends the **Taylor TruTemp oven dial cooking thermometer** (\$5.99, bedbathandbeyond.com).

GINGERBREAD WITH LEMON ICING

By Meredith Tomason, pastry chef
and founder of RareSweets

INGREDIENTS

- 1/3 cup water
- 1/8 cup dark coffee
- 1/3 cup molasses
- 1/3 tsp. baking soda
- 1/2 cup dark brown sugar
- 1/8 cup canola oil
- 1 1/4 tsp. freshly grated ginger root
- 1 large egg plus 1 yolk
- 4 1/2 ounces all-purpose flour
- 1 1/8 tsp. baking powder
- 1 1/8 tsp. cocoa powder
- 1 1/4 tsp. ground ginger
- 1 tsp. cinnamon
- 2/3 tsp. cardamom
- 1/2 tsp. nutmeg
- 1/4 tsp. kosher salt

Preheat convection oven to 375 degrees with low fan. Spray a small loaf pan with baking spray and coat with flour. Set aside. Bring water, coffee and molasses to a simmer. Remove from heat and whisk in baking soda. Set aside. Add brown sugar, canola oil and ginger root.

Move mixture to a bowl for a stand mixer. Using the paddle attachment, add the egg and yolk. Mix well.

In a separate bowl, sift together the dry ingredients and add to mixing bowl. Mix on low speed until just combined. The batter will be loose. Pour batter into the pan and bake for 30 minutes without opening the oven door. After 30 minutes, rotate the pan and bake an additional 10-15 minutes until the top springs back. Remove from the oven and let cool. Once at room temperature, remove the cake from the pan.

LEMON ICING

- 2 egg whites
- 2 cups powdered sugar
- Juice and zest of 1 lemon
- Pinch of salt

Using a stand mixer, whisk together all ingredients until fluffy and slightly stiff. Dollop icing on top of gingerbread.

MAKE IN ADVANCE

Freeze and serve
as needed or
give away in
holiday dispos-
able bakeware.