

EUROPEAN GINGERBREAD CUT-OUT COOKIES

Here is a nice twist on the holiday classic, decorated gingerbread cookies. This recipe is inspired by speculoos, a notably buttery and nicely spiced cookie common in Europe. The subtle differences between a traditional North American–style gingerbread and this recipe are the use of honey in place of molasses and the addition of a little cardamom, ground anise and black pepper to the spice mix in place of ginger.

Makes: 4 to 6 dozen cookies

Prep Time: 75 minutes (including decorating), plus chilling

Cook Time: 15 minutes, plus setting and air-drying

Ingredients..

Speculoos Cookie Dough:

1/2 cup (115 g) unsalted butter, at room temperature

1/2 cup (100 g) packed dark brown sugar

1/2 cup (150 g) honey

1 large egg, at room temperature

2 1/2 cups (375 g) all-purpose flour

2 tsp ground cinnamon

1/2 tsp ground nutmeg

1/2 tsp ground cloves

1/2 tsp ground cardamom

1/2 tsp ground anise

1/2 tsp baking soda

1/2 tsp fine sea salt

1/4 tsp black pepper

Royal Icing:

4 cups (520 g) icing sugar, sifted

3 Tbsp (14 g) meringue powder

6 Tbsp (90 mL) warm water

Food colour paste (optional)

Coloured sugars and dragées, for décor

Method...

1. For the cookies, beat the butter, brown sugar and honey together using electric beaters, or in a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment on medium speed, or by hand, until smooth. Beat in the egg.

2. Sift the flour, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, cardamom, anise, baking soda, salt and pepper into a separate bowl and add all at once to the butter mixture, stirring until evenly blended (the

dough will be soft). Scrape this batter onto a piece of plastic wrap, wrap and chill for at least 2 hours, until set. The dough will still feel a little soft once chilled.

3. Preheat the oven to 325°F (160°C) and line 2 baking trays with parchment paper. Roll out the dough on a lightly floured surface to just under 1/4 inch (6 mm) thick.

4. Use cookie cutters to cut out your desired shapes and sizes and transfer these to the baking trays, 1 inch (25 mm) apart.

5. Bake for 12 to 15 minutes, or until lightly browned at the edges. Transfer to a wire rack to cool completely before decorating.

6. For the royal icing, place the icing sugar, meringue powder and water in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment. Beat on low speed until the icing sugar is incorporated. Increase the speed to medium and beat until the icing comes together and is fluffy, about 5 minutes. Set aside some of the royal icing in a bowl with plastic wrap placed directly on the surface of the icing, at room temperature.

7. To make a “flood” style of icing that spreads over the surface of the cookie, add just a little more water until it spreads on its own but completely covers the cookie (thicker than glaze). To get the desired consistency, you can always add more water or icing sugar, as needed. Add food colour paste in small amounts, until you reached the colour intensity you want.

8. Spoon the “flood” style icing into a piping bag fitted with a small plain tip. Pipe an outline on the cookie and then fill it in with icing, or pipe dots and use a toothpick to swirl the colours. Allow 4 to 6 hours for the icing to dry. After drying, use the reserved royal icing to pipe additional details on top of the flooded layer then sprinkle with coloured sugars or dragées. Allow to dry for an additional 4 hours.

You can store these baked cookies, iced or plain, for 10 days in an airtight container at room temperature. They actually will keep for longer (about 1 month) if they are completely covered with royal icing. You can freeze undecorated baked cookies for up to 3 months. (Do not freeze decorated cookies as the icing may crack.) Thaw the cookies to room temperature before decorating.