

Christmas cookies made simple

Baking cookies is a holiday tradition for many families. Come the holiday season, many homes are filled with the inviting scents of vanilla, cinnamon and melting chocolate.

Baking cookies can be a social occasion in which family members and friends gather to create recipes passed down through generations. Or baking can be a solitary venture in which cookies are prepared and packaged as holiday gifts.

Either way, people who bake during the holiday season understand that making Christmas cookies can be a time-consuming, yet rewarding, process.

This year, holiday bakers can embrace a number of time-saving tips and tricks to reduce the amount of time they spend in the kitchen and possibly even improve on existing recipes.

- Use a cookie mix. Who says you have to toil and make cookies

from scratch? It's the thought that counts, and any number of creative recipes can begin by utilizing a premade baking mix. These mixes already have most of the dry cookie ingredients sifted together, including flour, baking soda, baking powder, salt, and sugar. All you have to do is add the wet ingredients and any extra embellishments to make the mix your own. If mixes are too much work, purchase refrigerated or frozen cookie dough. Include your own add-ins, such as nuts, white chocolate chips, bits of dried fruit, or crumbled candy canes, to give the premade dough a unique flavor.

- Prepare ahead. Many cookie dough recipes can be made and stored for later use. In fact, refrigerating a log of cookie dough can make it easier to cut or handle later on. Spread out the bulk of your baking over two days and you might feel less taxed.
- Try a no-bake recipe. Creative culinary experts continually reveal their clever tricks, and many of these include no-bake versions of favorite desserts. No bake cookies come together in a matter of minutes, but still employ a host of delicious ingredients. Recipes frequently feature similar ingredients to traditional cookies, but rely on chocolate, honey or peanut butter as the setting agent to keep them together. Bakers may also like not having to turn on their ovens.
- Recycle leftover cookies. If you have a fair amount of cookies remaining or several that broke apart or do not look good enough to serve, never fear. Such cookies can be used as part of another delicious dessert. Grind cookies into crumbs that can serve as a pie crust for pudding pies or no-bake cheesecakes, or mix cookie crumbs with cake frosting or a nut butter and roll into balls. Dunk the balls into melted chocolate, add a lollipop stick and make delicious cookie pops.

Cookies may be holiday traditions, but there are ways to reduce the amount of work and time required of holiday baking.

Make holiday shopping excursions special

As they fulfill the social obligations of the holiday season, many people find themselves spending less time at home. Consumer Reports notes that individuals spend a great deal of time shopping for gifts come the holiday season. Americans engage in 15 hours of shopping on average, with women spending twice as long as their male counterparts (20 hours versus 10). In addition, the average person devotes 10 or more hours to wrapping and returning gifts.

Holiday shopping can monopolize people's time away from home during the months of November and December, and some shoppers wonder how they become so disconnected from other activities, including family time, that they cherish throughout the rest of the year. One way to tackle holiday shopping with-

out sacrificing time with family and friends is to make holiday shopping a social event.

- Invite friends or family along. Recreate the days of your youth when it was fun to meet friends at the mall and scour the shops. Plan a meeting location and have an itinerary in place. Divide shopping lists so that everyone shares the task of shopping and fatigue doesn't set in prematurely.
- Make lunch or dinner part of the day. Incorporate refueling into your shopping plans. Failure to eat or drink can lead to hunger pangs and test shoppers' patience, two factors that are seldom conducive to successful shopping. Having an end goal to meet friends or family at a nearby restaurant - even a dining location right within the mall - can inspire intrepid shoppers to get their work done promptly. Reward yourself for a job well done over a tasty meal and maybe a cocktail. Just be sure to indulge responsibly.
- Break up the day with a flick. Many malls also play home to movie

Cards

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Turn favorite Christmas cards into mementos that can be saved year after year, which also will dress up refrigerators or other magnetic surfaces. This idea works well for photo greeting cards as well.

- Make Christmas card ornaments. Use the cards to create uniquely shaped ornaments for the tree. Cards can be turned into block shapes and hung with ribbon. Another idea is to punch out circles or ovals from the cards and tile them on a foam egg to look like a multicolored pine cone. Explore your creative side and decorate your tree at the same time.
- Create greeting card garlands. Display cards by stringing them together and hanging them from the mantle or another prominent area. If cards are too large, punch out large circles from the cards and then attach those disks to heavy thread.

- Decorate your packages. Instead of overspending on preprinted gift bags, make your own. Buy plain bags in a solid color and then embellish them with cutout patterns or pictures from Christmas cards.
- Frame favorite cards. Make greeting cards a permanent part of holiday decor by framing the most decorative ones you receive. Use these frames year after year and put them on display with other holiday decorations.
- Make a wine bottle gift tag. Use a 11/4-inch hole punch to create an opening for the neck of a wine bottle on a piece of folded card stock. Glue a greeting card to the portion of the card stock that will lay flush with the wine bottle and you have a decorative wine tag.
- Shred older cards for confetti. Fill gift boxes or bags with homemade confetti made from recycled Christmas cards.

Avoid

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- **Eat before you go shopping.** Leaving the house hungry may tempt you to make impulse food purchases that can compromise healthy diets. It's easy to grab a quick convenience item at the food court or from a vending machine. However, eating a snack before you leave will alleviate hunger and you can control the foods that go into your body.
- **Make smarter food choices.** When visiting a holiday party buffet line or grabbing an on-the-go snack, think about the foods you choose. Look for low-calorie items that will still fill you up. Proteins, complex carbohydrates and vegetables are good choices. Avoid creamy dips and dressings, and if you want to try something fried or cheese-laden, do so only sparingly.
- **Be selective with sweets.** Sweets are readily available during the holiday season. Rather than filling up your plate with a little "bite" of each dessert you want to try, select your favorite and then enjoy a reasonable portion.
- **Limit sampling while cooking.** If you are entertaining others, cut down on tasting while you prepare the meal. Those calories can add up without you knowing it, and soon you've eaten an entire portion even before the festivities begin.
- **Pack healthy snacks.** It's always a good idea to have healthy snacks at the ready to tame random hunger pangs. Bring a favorite treat with you while shopping or if you will be visiting others. This helps you control your portion size and can keep you from overeating.
- **Mind your drinks, too.** Many beverages, including alcoholic beverages and sweetened soft drinks, are high in calories. A single serving of wine can have anywhere from 100 to 300 calories. It's easy to lose count of caloric intake when indulging, but opt for low-calorie drinks or water whenever possible.
- **Increase your level of physical activity.** Find ways to remain physically active during the holiday season. Park further away from mall entrances so you can walk a greater distance and burn more calories. Take a few extra laps around the mall. Opt for the stairs instead of the elevator or escalator. If you're at a party with upbeat music, get on the dance floor and work off some calories.

Holiday weight gain may seem like an inevitability. However, with some forward thinking and smart choices, holiday celebrants can prevent weight gain this holiday season.

Did you know?

While it might be synonymous with Santa Claus and cold weather, the North Pole is actually much warmer than the South Pole. That's because the North Pole sits at a lower elevation than the South Pole, and it is located in the middle of an ocean. The South Pole, on the other hand, is located on the continent of Antarctica, which is covered in ice. But Santa fans mulling a trip to the North Pole to visit jolly old St. Nick might want to think otherwise, as temperatures at the North Pole are less than welcoming. Summertime temperatures at the North Pole, for example, hover right at the freezing point. In addition, because of the way Earth rotates, the North Pole experiences just one sunrise and one sunset each year. However, because the sun is always above the horizon in the summer and below the horizon in the winter, the North Pole actually experiences 24 hours of sunlight in summer and zero hours of sunlight in the winter. While children in North America know the North Pole as home to Santa Claus, that's a relatively recent addition to the legend of Santa Claus, a story that some historians suggest traces its origins all the way back to the third century. Historians credit famed 19th century caricaturist and editorial cartoonist Thomas Nast with being the first to link Santa Claus and his workshop to the North Pole. However, many Nordic countries continue to say Santa Claus lives in their territories.

theaters. Plan your shopping around the movie schedule so you can take a two-hour break to rest and relax in the theater. Chances are you'll come out of the film relaxed, refreshed and ready to tackle the rest of your shopping list.


- Make it a date night. The thought of shopping may not conjure up ideas of romance, but if time is short, couples can use shopping excursions as an opportunity to spend time together. Visit a coffee shop or a bar for a nightcap afterward and enjoy some one-on-one time. Parents can enlist the help of a babysitter to keep children entertained while they enjoy some uninterrupted time with each other.

Shopping fills the days leading to the holidays. Make the most of such excursions by inviting friends and family along.

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