

How to Make Gingerbread Boxes and Baskets

... such as those pictured right and on pages 33 and 130:



- Start by creating templates for the pieces that will compose the sides and bottom of your project. Draw the desired shapes onto 3-ply cardboard and cut them out. Double-check to make sure your templates fit together as you envisioned. Adjust any templates as needed.
- Mix, cut, and bake the gingerbread pieces as described in Construction Gingerbread (pp. 146 and 147), using your templates as cutting guides.
- Before decorating or assembling any pieces, check to be sure they fit snugly together in 3-D. If they do not, straighten any bumpy or misshapen edges by gently shaving them with a paring knife.
- Box and basket sides can look beautiful undecorated, but feel free to top-coat them with Royal Icing (p. 151) or to further embellish them with wafer papers (p. 154) or other decorative techniques. (For the May Day baskets, pictured right, I first top-coated the sides and then applied wafer paper, preprinted in a toile pattern.) Dry all decorations thoroughly before proceeding to the next step.
- Spread Royal Icing, thinned to top-coating consistency (p. 152), on the back of each piece. The added icing reinforces and seals the cookies so they stay straight and firm even in the face of humidity.
- Once the icing has dried, fill a parchment pastry cone (p. 153) with thick Royal Icing and glue the pieces together at the seams. If the pieces slip or have difficulty standing up on their own, thicken the icing with powdered sugar. (The icing can almost never be too thick for this step.) Use wadded paper towels or other lightweight objects, if needed, to prop the pieces in place. Pre-made fondant pieces, such as the bows and handles on the baskets in “Spring Fling,” can also be glued on in this step. (See “Fun with Fondant,” page 155, for bow- and handle-making tips.)
- Let the “glue” dry thoroughly, ideally overnight, before moving your creation. If stored in airtight containers, 3-D gingerbread projects will remain presentation-ready for many months.



Gingerbread May Day
Baskets

Signature Sugar Cookie Dough

Makes about 2 dozen (2 ¾-inch) cookies

The foundation of the many signature sugar cookies in the swaps, this recipe is chameleon-like in its ability to assume different flavors. Match its taste to the season by adding zippy citrus zest in spring and summer and pungent spices and extracts in winter and fall.

Complexity:

1

Active Time:

1

Type:

Rolled

Prep Talk: For easiest handling, the dough must be chilled at least 3 hours before rolling and cutting. The dough can be frozen up to 1 month with minimal loss of flavor if wrapped tightly in plastic and

then foil. Store baked cookies in airtight containers at room temperature up to 1 week. (Cookies frosted with Royal Icing should also be stored at room temperature, as refrigeration can cause the icing colors to bleed and the cookies to soften.)

2 cups all-purpose flour
1½ teaspoons baking powder
¼ teaspoon salt
6 tablespoons (¾ stick) unsalted butter, softened
⅓ cup (⅓ stick) shortening
¾ cup granulated sugar
1 large egg
1 tablespoon whole milk
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
Additional flavorings, if desired (see “FAQ,” right)

1. Combine the flour, baking powder, and salt in a small bowl. Set aside for use in Step 4.
2. Using an electric mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, beat the butter and shortening on medium speed until creamy. Gradually add the sugar and beat until light and fluffy, about 1 to 2 minutes.
3. Whisk the egg, milk, vanilla extract, and any additional flavorings (see “Variations,” below) together in another bowl. Slowly add the liquid to the butter mixture and blend thoroughly on low to medium speed until the mixture is smooth. Scrape down the sides of the bowl as needed to ensure even mixing.
4. Turn the mixer to low speed and gradually add the flour mixture, mixing just until incorporated.
5. Flatten the dough into a disk, wrap tightly in plastic, and refrigerate at least 3 hours or until firm enough to roll without sticking.
6. Position a rack in the center of the oven and preheat the oven to 375 degrees F. Line two cookie sheets with parchment paper.
7. Roll the dough on a lightly floured surface to a ⅛-inch thickness. Cut out assorted shapes with your favorite cookie cutters. Carefully transfer the cookies to the prepared cookie sheets with an offset spatula, leaving about 1 inch between each cutout.

8. Bake 8 to 10 minutes, or until lightly browned around the edges. (Baking time varies with cookie size and thickness.) Let particularly long or delicately shaped cookies cool 1 to 2 minutes on the cookie sheet before transferring to wire racks. Otherwise, immediately transfer to racks and cool completely before frosting with Royal Icing or storing.

Variations:

Lemon-Lime: Reduce the vanilla extract to ½ teaspoon and add 2 teaspoons finely grated lemon zest and 1 teaspoon pure lime oil.

Cinnamon: Add 1½ teaspoons ground cinnamon to the dry ingredients and reduce the vanilla extract to ¾ teaspoon. *Note:* The ground cinnamon will tint the dough pale brown.

Anise: Reduce the vanilla extract to ½ teaspoon and add ½ teaspoon anise extract. Sprinkle each cookie sheet with 1½ teaspoons whole anise seed before placing and baking the cookies.

FAQ: Are certain flavorings preferred for cookies and icings?

Opt for 100 percent natural extracts and oils whenever possible. The reason: These flavorings taste better. Though oils and extracts of the same flavor may be interchanged, oils tend to be more potent and will also hold up better in the oven. When substituting oil for extract, I generally start with about one quarter of the specified quantity of extract and gradually add more oil to taste. For sources, see page 156.

Ganache

Makes about 2 ½ cups

This decadent chocolate and cream blend easily morphs from satiny glaze to creamy filling simply by setting it in the fridge. It can also be made with either dark or white chocolate with only minor adjustments.

Complexity:

1

Active Time:



Type:

N/A

electric mixer fitted with a whip attachment. (*Note:* The bowl, whip attachment, and all mixing utensils should be completely free of fat, or the egg whites will not stiffen.) Beat on medium speed to firm peaks.

2. Meanwhile, combine the sugar and corn syrup in a large non-stick skillet, and stir to evenly moisten the sugar. Place the mixture over medium-high heat and bring to a boil, stirring as needed to make sure the sugar completely dissolves. Continue to boil approximately 30 seconds, until thick, syrupy, and bubbly through to the center.
3. Turn the mixer to medium-high speed and gradually add the hot sugar syrup in a slow, steady stream. (Do not stop the mixer while adding the syrup, or the egg whites can curdle.) Once all of the syrup has been incorporated, quickly scrape down the sides of the bowl, taking care not to scrape any hard crystallized sugar into the meringue. Resume beating at high speed until the meringue has cooled, about 7 to 10 minutes.
4. Add the butter 2 tablespoons at a time, beating well after each addition. *Note:* The icing will initially deflate and look grainy but will get quite thick and glossy as more butter is incorporated.
5. Add the vanilla extract and additional flavorings, if desired, and mix well.

Royal Icing

Makes about 4½ cups, enough to top-coat 4 to 5 dozen (3-inch) cookies

This icing is by far my favorite frosting for cutout cookies. Because it contains high-protein egg whites, it dries quickly with minimal spreading; it also holds food coloring quite well with limited to no bleeding. Use this thick formulation as edible “glue” for gingerbread construction projects (p. 148), or adjust its consistency for other cookie decorating techniques. (See sidebar, this page, for consistency adjustments, and page 152 for decorating techniques.)

Note: Since the egg whites in this recipe are not heated, it is best to use pasteurized whites to minimize the risk of food-borne illness, especially when serving the very young or old or those with compromised immune systems.

Complexity:

1

Active Time:



Type:

N/A

Prep Talk: Tinted icing is best used the day it is mixed because the color will dry more uniformly. Otherwise, the icing can be made 1 to 2 days ahead and stored in the fridge. Bring the icing to room temperature when ready to use and stir vigorously to restore its original consistency. Once applied to cookies, the icing should remain at room temperature so it sets into a crunchy candy-like coating. **Important:** Unless you're using the icing, always cover the surface flush with plastic wrap to prevent a crust from forming.

2 pounds powdered sugar

½ teaspoon cream of tartar

About 11 tablespoons pasteurized whites (or 5 large egg whites)

Flavoring, to taste

Soft gel food coloring (see “FAQ,” p. 152) of your choice, to desired shade (optional)

1. Mix the powdered sugar and cream of tartar together in the bowl of an electric mixer. Stir in the egg whites by hand to moisten the sugar. Fit the electric mixer with a whip attachment and beat the mixture on low speed to evenly distribute the egg whites. Turn the mixer to medium-high speed and continue to beat about 2 minutes, until the icing is silky and very white. (The icing will lighten and thicken as you beat it.)
2. Beat in flavoring and/or food coloring, if desired. Mix well before using.

Consistency Adjustments for Royal Icing

The following consistency adjustments are approximate guidelines for a single batch of un-tinted Royal Icing. The addition of food coloring or flavoring, beating time, and normal variations in egg size can all affect the end consistency. If you make an adjustment and still think your icing is too thin or too thick for your application, simply adjust by adding powdered sugar to thicken or water to thin.