This creative book has become my new gold-standard guide to cookie decorating. Julia Usher’ s whimsical designs and ideas make this book as fun as it is informative.

— Tish Boyle, Editor, Dessert Professional and author of The Good Cookie

Julia Usher’ s over-the-top cookies and detailed, theme-inspired swaps promise joyful sharing and sweet memories for year-round entertaining.

— Flo Braker, author of Baking for All Occasions, The Simple Art of Perfect Baking, and Sweet Miniatures

Julia Usher’ s gorgeous and doable ideas inspire us not only to trade cookies at holiday time but the whole year through. Filled to the brim with mouthwatering recipes and delectable photographs, Cookie Swap is a sweet treat to savor and celebrate.

— Nancy Wall Hopkins, Deputy Food and Entertaining Editor, Better Homes and Gardens

Cookie swaps are not just for Christmas anymore! Cookie Swap: Creative Treats to Share Throughout the Year shows that the cookie swap is perfectly suited not only to holiday gatherings but also to garden parties, showers, children’s birthdays, summer get-togethers, and more. A cookie swap has all the traits that make a potluck so effortless to host. Plus, Christmas parties about cookies is simply adorable, no matter what the season.

As talented baker Julia M. Usher reveals, cookies are infinitely adaptable to different party themes and times of year, resulting in scores of delightful possibilities. Among Cookie Swap’ s eight parties are a kids’ summer bash, with Lemonade Slices and Chocolate Chip Watermelon Wedges; a spooky Halloween fest, featuring Witches’ Fingers and Friendly Ghosts; and a classic Christmas swap with Hot Buttered Rum Meltaways, Cranberry-Pistachio Biscotti, and Eggnog Cheesecake Streusel Bars.

With dozens of decorating and invitation ideas, over 50 delectable recipes, mouthwatering photos, and tips on hosting the best swap possible, Cookie Swap will inspire readers to make the sharing of cookies the centerpiece of every event.

Julia M. Usher is a celebrated pastry chef and food writer who has designed extraordinary desserts for such magazines as Better Homes and Gardens, Fine Cooking, Bon Appetit, and Modern Bride, and has judged on HSN’s Whisk Watch and The Food Network’s Iron Chef America. Julia is also a featured contributing editor at Chocolatier magazine, a James Beard Foundation Journalism Award finalist, and a Director of the International Association of Culinary Professionals (IACP). Julia divides her time between St. Louis, Missouri, and Stonington, Maine. She lives in St. Louis, Missouri.

Steve Adams loves making beautiful photos of all kinds of food and beverages for companies like Nesika, Anheuser-Busch, Baciocchi, Perrier, and Kraft. Steve is a member of ASMP and the American Society of Media Photographers (ASMP) and has taught studio photography at the university level and the Maine Media Workshops. He lives in St. Louis, Missouri.

Cover design by Jocelyn Foye
Cover photos © 2009 Steve Adams

Julia M. Usher
Photographs by Steve Adams

Cookie Swap
Creative Treats to Share Throughout the Year

Cover design by Jocelyn Foye
Cover photos © 2009 Steve Adams

Julia M. Usher
Photographs by Steve Adams
In memory of my sweet Dad.

The only thing bigger than his appetite for learning was his unconditional support. Dad, I miss you.
Focus on the Defining Details

After the theme is set, the work of over-the-top party preparation truly begins. More often than not, this is the time when hosts get overwhelmed. Should your head start spinning at this stage, I suggest you consider challenging aspects of each guest’s contribution at least four weeks (generally no more than two or three standard-sized batches), or at whatever number s/he can comfortably prepare. The first step is setting the theme. Consider carefully:

For ultimate thematic twist, I love to use cutout cookies as part of the décor or to replace other party elements. Cookies contribute color, flavor, texture, and fragrance, all at the same time. What’s more, when cookies double as décor, you can often forego costly flowers, table accessories, and other party props. Sprinkled throughout the chapters, you’ll discover edibles of every form—from cookie centerpieces and invitations to take-home boxes and baskets. Each chapter also contains a signature cutout cookie that showcases one or more of eleven distinct decorating techniques. Whether you choose to replicate these signature cookies and edible projects or design your own, “Cookie-Cutter Approaches” (p. 142) provides all the tools you get started. There you’ll find the recipes that are the foundation of my cookie projects, such as Cutout Cookie Gingerbread, Signature Sugar Cookie Dough, and Royal Icing, and other basic recipes that I rely on more than once in the cookie swaps. “The Sugar on Top” (p. 152) provides added sweetness with step-by-step instructions for top-coating, marbleizing, outlining, and other decorating techniques.

How to Use This Book

The parties you are about to experience are fully loaded. Each one comes with a complete cookie menu and ideas for nearly every party element. What I hope these parties will be a rich source of inspiration, and I hope you will put the projects and recipes to suit you—just like your personal style, but your skill level and available time as well.

To help my parties work for you, I’ve included several planning and preparation tools throughout the book. You’ll find a key attached to each recipe that highlights complexity, active time, cookie type, and other preparation advice. (See “De-coding the Cookie Key,” this page.) Optional steps are also called out separately. If time is scarce, they can simply be skipped. As for guidance on incredible gifts, the book offers a “Stamp-Ins” for extra easy and budget-friendly alternatives to my more challenging projects. Finally, “Resources” (p. 156) is a guide to the less common ingredients and supplies used on occasion in the recipes. It includes contact information for purveyors of custom cookie cutters and stencils, unusual extracts and oils, dragees (sugar beads) and other ready-made cookie decorations, and various cookie-making tools.

De-coding the Cookie Key

• Complexity speaks only to the inherent challenge posed by the recipe, not to the required time.

1. Easy enough for the novice cook
2. Most average home cooks could make with no trouble
3. Best left to skilled home bakers or those seeking a challenge

Prep Talk

• Check out the tips for each type starting on page 10.
• Prep Talk tells you what parts of a recipe need to be done in advance as well as how far ahead you can push the baking before there is a marked change in the cookie’s flavor or texture.

Storage tips and any special tools required are also noted here. Note: I generally don’t like to bake more than 1 or 2 days ahead or to freeze pre-baked cookies, as most cookies are best the day they’re made. However, some recipes require chilling, freezing, or other advance preparation, and others are more forgiving if you have no choice but to bake ahead.

1. ¼ hour to 2 or more hours.
2. ½ hour to 1 hour and 15 minutes.
3. 1 hour to 2 hours.
4. 1½ hours to 2 hours.
5. 2 or more hours.

Take my cookie decorating projects closely, and you’ll also see hints of my friends and family members, adding personality to the events. In my cookie displays. In the tablescapes that open each chapter, you’ll find all sorts of everyday items used in fun yet practical ways. Look closely, and you’ll also see hints of my friends and family members, adding personality to the events.
For Every Cookie Recipe...

- **Look before you leap.** To save time in the long run, read the recipe from start to finish before you start, and measure and prep all ingredients as they’re described in the ingredient list. Some recipes call for toasted and cooled nuts, others for softened butter, etc.

- **Head orders.** Pay attention to the order of operations in the ingredient list. Any operation, such as “sifted” or “chopped,” that is listed after the ingredient should be performed after that ingredient is measured. For instance, if a recipe calls for “1 cup flour, sifted,” you should sift the flour after measuring it. If, instead, the recipe calls for “1 cup sifted flour,” you should sift before measuring. In the latter case, you’ll end up with less flour by weight. Though this distinction may seem minor, the difference of even an ounce of flour can have a large impact on the texture and moistness of baked goods.

- **Mind your measures.** In baking, precision matters. To make my recipes come out just as intended, always measure dry ingredients by spooning them into the measuring cup and leveling the top with a straight-sided spatula or knife. Placing the measuring cup into the flour bin compresses the flour, which will leave you with more flour by weight than desired—and, in turn, a heavier, drier product.

- **Don’t take sides.** If your cookie sheet has sides of any height, turn it over and bake on the back. This way, the cookies will bake at closer to the same rate. (Because metal is an efficient heat conductor, cookies that bake the sides of the cookie sheet will brown more rapidly than those in the middle.) It’s also easier to slide the cookies onto cooling racks when there are no sides to get in the way.

- **Bulk up.** Use large (13 x 18-inch) heavy-gauge aluminum-sheet jelly-roll pans for cookie sheets whenever you can. The light-colored, thick metal surface encourages uniform browning, and the reinforced rim minimizes warping of the pan over time. Plus, the generous size accommodates more cookies.

- **Give your cookies space.** To ensure even baking and browning, don’t crowd the cookies on the cookie sheet, bake one sheet at a time in the center of the oven (unless otherwise specified), and rotate the sheet midway through baking, if needed.
With April showers finally past, May beckons us to throw open our doors and to rejoice in the start of the outdoor party season. And what more fitting celebration than this teatime cookie swap? Set in the garden and blooming with references to flowers and herbs, it looks and tastes as if it is the handiwork of Mother Nature.

The party theme is planted with the save-the-date cards, replicas of old-time seed packs. Closer to the party, gingerbread May Day baskets are left dangling on guests’ doors. Filled with fresh-picked blossoms and specifics of the upcoming fête, these edible invitations both enchant and inform.

At the front gate, a garden pot overgrown with gingerbread roses welcomes party-goers. Uncommon herb and flower-scented cookies appear down the path, set on pots and planters rooted in a moss-covered tabletop. Shaped mostly into dainty petits fours, these treats allow guests to sample guilt-free. The perfect indulgence for an elegant tea!

The pleasure continues even as the afternoon sun fades. Contented guests file the party recipes into empty seed packets and wind their way back along the path. As the gate closes, the hostess bids farewell with leftover cookies arranged in lovely fabric-covered flower pots.

**Cause to Celebrate:**
- May Day; Mothers’ Day; a springtime birthday; the much anticipated end of a long winter; Earth Day; a gathering of good friends for refreshment and renewal; a bridal shower; a celebration of new beginnings—a baby, a career change, a first home!

Clockwise from the teacup caddy at top: Mixed Seed Wafers, Lavender Shortbread (among decorated sugar cookies), Rosemary Blonde Brownies, Anise-Scented Springerle, Cocoa-Mint Sandwich Cookies, and Lemon-Thyme Bombons (center). Not pictured: Rosewater Marguerites.
**Dish Towel Invitations**

*To make:* Digitally scan gift wrap and/or vintage holiday postcards and then print them onto iron-on transfer paper (available in most office supply and craft stores) along with the invitation and some favorite cookie recipes. Follow the ironing instructions on the transfer paper package label. Note: Iron-on transfers will take best to light-colored fabrics with minimal texture, such as tightly woven cotton. Also, remember to reverse your image so it reads in the right direction after it is ironed on.

**Stand-in**

*If not a dish towel as an invitation, then why not an apron to fit this party’s baking theme? Add pockets where needed and tuck printed invitations inside them, or pin the invitations in place. Wrap the aprons in boxes before dropping them in the mail.*

---

**A Sweet Welcome Wreath**

*To make:* Cut a large (9½ x 13-inch) oval (or circle) from Construction Gingerbread (p. 146), using an oval (or round) cake pan as your cutting guide. Before baking, use a 3⁄8- to ½-inch round pastry tip to cut two holes at the top of the oval, about 6 to 7 inches apart. Bake and cool the gingerbread as directed on page 147. Use thick Royal Icing to attach decorated snowflake cookies around the edge and a yuletide greeting, spelled out with cookie letters, in the middle. Once the icing is dry, thread the holes with ribbon and hang your creation. Avoid hanging with wire or string, as they can sometimes cut through the wreath. For tips on cutting and baking large gingerbread pieces and working with Royal Icing, see pages 147 and 151, respectively.

Opposite: Uniquely fragrant, flavorful, and showy, cutout cookies make a grander sensory statement than any other party prop I know. At this swap, they’re used for votive candle holders and snowflake ornaments that hang from an ornate chandelier, as well as for “trees” in the forest centerpiece (p. 126).

Bottom right: Clear glass ornaments filled with rock candy, gold sugar beads, snippets of tinsel, and cookie names identify this swap’s treats.
Cocoa-Mint Sandwich Cookies
Makes about 4½ dozen (1½-inch) sandwiches
Though refreshingly cool with a white chocolate-mint filling, these sandwiches generate warm feelings when shared among friends.

Complexity:  Active Time:  Type:  
2  Rolled; sandwich

Prep Talk: Both the filling and dough require chilling before they can be used—about 20 minutes for the former and at least 1½ to 2 hours for the latter. The dough can be frozen up to 1 month with minimal loss of flavor if tightly wrapped in plastic and then foil. Store baked unfilled cookies up to 1 week in airtight containers at room temperature. Once filled, the cookies are best served immediately. Otherwise, refrigerate (the filling is perishable) and serve within 1 to 2 days, before the cocoa wafers soften in the fridge.

Cocoa Wafer Dough
2 cups sifted all-purpose flour
½ cup unsweetened Dutch-process cocoa powder
¾ teaspoon salt
1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, softened
1 cup plus 4 tablespoons granulated sugar, divided
2 large eggs, room temperature
1 teaspoon pure mint extract

About 4 ounces premium semisweet chocolate, melted (for coating)

White Chocolate-Mint Filling
1 recipe Ganache, White Chocolate Variation (p. 150), cream increased to 1 cup
½ cup loosely packed fresh mint leaves (less than half of a ½-ounce package, stems removed), or to taste
½ teaspoon pure mint extract

1. Mix the Cocoa Wafer Dough. Combine the flour, cocoa powder, and salt in a small bowl and set aside.
   Place the butter and ¾ cup sugar in the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with a paddle attachment. Beat on medium speed until creamy, about 1 minute. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition. Scrape down the sides of the bowl as needed to ensure even mixing. Continue to beat until light and fluffy, about 1½ minutes. Turn the mixer to low speed and add the mint extract. Gradually add the flour mixture, blending just until evenly incorporated.

2. Divide the dough into two equal portions and flatten each portion into a disk. Wrap each disk tightly in plastic and refrigerate at least 1½ to 2 hours, or until firm enough to roll.

3. Position a rack in the center of the oven and preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Line two or more cookie sheets with parchment paper.

4. Work with one disk of dough at a time. On a lightly floured work surface, roll the dough to a ¼-inch thickness. Dust the work surface and rolling pin with additional flour as needed to keep the dough from sticking. (This dough is softer than that used for some of the other rolled cookies in this book, so it may require more dusting.) Cut out small disks using a fluted 1½-inch round cookie cutter. (Periodically clean off the cutter and dust it with flour to prevent sticking.) Transfer the cutouts to the prepared cookie sheets, spacing them about 1 inch apart. Dust off any excess flour on the cookie tops with a pastry brush. Repeat with the remaining dough. For best results, briefly chill the dough scraps before re-rolling.

5. Sprinkle the cookie tops generously with the remaining sugar (about 1 tablespoon sugar per cookie sheet) and bake 14 to 16 minutes, or until very firm. Immediately transfer to wire racks and cool completely before coating with chocolate and filling.

6. Using a small knife or offset spatula, spread a thin layer of melted semisweet chocolate on the back of each cookie. Place the cookies on parchment paper-lined cookie sheets, chocolate side up, and set in the refrigerator about 10 minutes or until the chocolate is set.

7. Prepare the White Chocolate-Mint Filling. This filling will set if made too far in advance, so make it no sooner than you intend to fill the cookies. Prepare 1 recipe Ganache, White Chocolate Variation, as directed on page 150, except increase the cream to 1 cup. Coarsely chop or tear the mint and place it in the scalded cream at the end of Step 2. Allow the mint to steep in the warm cream about 30 minutes; then reheat the cream to the scalding point before proceeding to Step 3. (Note: The mint will be strained out in this step.) Stir in the mint extract at the end. Chill as directed in Step 4 (p. 150) for piping ganache, about 20 minutes or until slightly thickened. Transfer to the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with a whisk attachment. Beat on medium speed just until the ganache turns a shade white and holds the “tracks” left by the beater. Do not overbeat, or the ganache will break and become grainy.

8. Assemble the sandwiches. Work quickly before the ganache sets. Fit a pastry bag with a medium (¾-inch) round tip and fill the bag with the ganache. Pipe a small (about 1½-inch-diameter) mound of filling on the chocolate-coated side of half of the cookies. Top each mound with another cookie, placed chocolate side down. Press gently to squeeze the ganache to the edges. Serve immediately or store as directed. Note: There will be some leftover filling. Try it gently heated and spooned over ice cream.

Lemon-Thyme Bonbons
Makes 5 to 5½ dozen (1½-inch) “bonbons”
Both filled and frosted, this bite-size cookie is indulgent without being excessive. Note: For more kid-friendly variation, omit the thyme and substitute peach or apricot jam for the lemon marmalade.

Complexity:  Active Time:  Type:  
2  Rolled; sandwich

Prep Talk: The dough must be chilled 2½ to 3 hours before rolling and cutting. The dough can be frozen up to 1 month with minimal loss of flavor if tightly wrapped in plastic and then foil. Store baked cookies in airtight containers at room temperature up to 3 to 4 days. For the crunchiest texture, enjoy immediately, as the cookies soften after 1 day.

Sage Lemon-Ganache Paste (makes 1½ cups)
Combine the flour, cocoa powder, and salt in a small bowl and set aside.

Prep Talk:
Bake unfilled cookies up to 1 week in airtight containers at room temperature.

54
Lemon–Poppy Seed Cottontail Cookies

Makes 2½ to 3 dozen (2½-inch) “bunny bottoms”

Here’s what Peter Cottontail might look like if you were following him down the bunny trail. These amusing bunny bottoms are as tasty as they are whimsical. If time is of the essence, skip the optional decorating steps and serve the cookies un-iced. They’re wonderful this way as well, particularly if you prefer your cookies less sweet.

Complexity:  
Active Time:  
Type: Drop; hand-shaped; piped

Prep Talk: Make icing ears and tails at least 48 hours in advance of baking the cookies, and dry the glaze on the bodies at least 2 hours before applying the body parts. (Note: Fondant, p. 155, may also be shaped into ears as described in Step 2. In this case, let the ears dry at least a week before attaching to the cookies.) Store in airtight containers at room temperature up to 4 or 5 days.

Lemon Icing (optional)

1 recipe Royal Icing (p. 151)  
1 teaspoon pure lemon extract (or ¼ teaspoon pure lemon oil, p. 156)  
A few drops yellow soft gel food coloring (optional, p. 152)  
About 6½ tablespoons strained freshly squeezed lemon juice, divided (optional, to thin icing)  
About 2 tablespoons white nonpareils (optional, for coating the tails)

Lemon–Poppy Seed Cookies

2¼ cups plus 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour  
1½ tablespoons poppy seeds  
1½ teaspoons baking powder  
½ teaspoon salt  
¾ cup (1½ sticks) plus 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, cold, chopped into tablespoon-size pieces  
¾ cup plus 2 tablespoons granulated sugar  
1 large egg  
1½ teaspoons finely grated lemon zest  
2 tablespoons strained freshly squeezed lemon juice  
1½ teaspoons pure lemon extract (or ½ to ¾ teaspoon pure lemon oil)  
½ teaspoon pure vanilla extract  
Powdered sugar (optional; as needed to thicken icing)

1. Make the Lemon Icing (optional). Prepare 1 recipe Royal Icing and mix in the lemon extract (or oil). If desired, add a few drops yellow food coloring to make pale yellow bunnies. Portion off about 1½ cups icing for use in Step 2. (Cover the surface of the remaining icing flush with plastic wrap and refrigerate until used in Step 7.)

2. Pipe and dry the bunny ears and tails (optional). Line two or more cookie sheets with parchment paper.

3. Position a rack in the center of the oven and preheat the oven to 400 degrees F. Line two or more cookie sheets with parchment paper.

4. Mix the Lemon–Poppy Seed Cookies. Combine the flour, poppy seeds, baking powder, and salt in a small bowl. Set aside.

5. Roll the dough between your palms into 1¼-inch balls and place about 2 inches apart on the prepared cookie sheets. For the most uniform balls, first portion the dough into mounds using a level 1½-inch (#50) scoop or 1 level tablespoon per mound; then roll into perfect balls. Flatten each ball into a 1½-inch disk by barely pressing it with the palm of your hand.

6. Bake 9 to 10 minutes, or until puffy, set, and lightly browned around the edges.