

From The Improvisational Cook by Sally Schneider

Ethereal Brown Sugar Butter Cookies with Many Variations

Fleur de Sel Cookies
Earl Grey Tea Cookies
Holton's Coffee Vanilla Bean Cookies
Shortbread Pastry Lids and Shells for Tarts
Brown Sugar Lime Curd Tart
Lime Curd

When I am asked to bring a dessert to a dinner party, I invariably turn to this recipe for delectable, melt-in-your-mouth cookies fragrant with butter and the caramel flavors of light brown sugar. When I want to whip up something dazzling for my own impromptu dinners, it can double as a pastry dough for tarts. A few drops of orange flower water subtly intensifies the flavor of the butter, a trick I learned from my Greek grandmother. For a memorable dessert for a dinner party, bake the cookies at the last minute and place the cookie sheet hot out of the oven in the center of the table (on trivets of course), along with a metal spatula for the guests to serve themselves warm cookies.

Best of all the cookies will last several weeks when stored in an airtight container. They make much -appreciated gifts.

Understanding

The beauty of this dough is that it is extraordinarily mutable. Its essential structure: butter, sugar, flour, cornstarch, yields a tender cookie into which you can plug all kinds of interesting flavorings.

The sugar itself even poses interesting possibilities: Replace some of the light brown sugar with varying proportions of granulated sugar to mute the caramel-toffee effect, depending on flavorings. Use exotic sugars such as turbinado, moscovado or maple sugar, each with their own distinctive flavor.

Possible flavorings for this dough are so vast that I have only scratched the surface with my improvisations. Possibilities include fruit zests such as lemon, orange or lime and ground sweet spices such as cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, coriander, white pepper – singly or in combination. Replace the vanilla extract with a flavorful alcohol like brandy, bourbon and rum. Rosewater, instead of orange flower, and grated nutmeg would make a Shaker-inspired. About 2 tablespoons of fresh herbs, such as rosemary, thyme, lemon thyme, lemon verbena or about 1

tablespoons of flowers such lavender or rose geranium, finely minced, alone, in combination, or in tandem with grated lemon or orange zest, make lovely surprising tea cookies and pastry for freeform fruit tarts. Add the flavoring to the butter-sugar mixture to incorporate them thoroughly.

Incorporate interesting elements into the dough: crushed toffee, ground roasted pecans, almonds or hazelnuts, shredded coconut, fine bits of crystallized ginger, grated chocolate and so on. Replace a tablespoon or two of the butter with a fragrant roasted hazelnut or walnut oil for a nuttier cookie.

Ground tea – Earl Grey to be exact with its citrus-floral scent of bergamot – yields an astonishing cookie and makes me wonder which other teas would work.

This versatile dough can be formed in a variety of shapes, for a variety of purposes: wedges, squares or rounds can serve as cookies, or as “top crusts” for freeform tarts. Pressed into a pie tin, the dough makes a great tart base.

Makes about thirty 1 1/2-inch round cookies, or 12 to 16 wedges or squares.

1/2 cup (1 stick) cold unsalted butter, cut into pieces

1/3 cup packed light brown sugar

A scant 1/4 teaspoon kosher salt

1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

1/4 teaspoon orange flower water (optional)

3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour

3 tablespoons cornstarch

Prepare the dough. Preheat the oven to 325°. Arrange the oven racks in the lower half of the oven. In a food processor, combine the butter, sugar, salt, vanilla and orange flower water, if desired, and process to a light, fluffy paste, 20 to 30 seconds. Remove the lid and add the flour and cornstarch. Pulse until the dough begins to clump together and the mixture is fairly uniform, 8 to 10 times. Gather the dough together into a rough ball, kneading a few times if necessary. (You can also mix the dough by hand or with an electric mixture).

Alternative 1: Form the dough into a freezable log, chill, slice into rounds and bake. Form the soft dough into a log about 1 1/2 inches in diameter. Gently roll up the log in plastic wrap and refrigerate to firm up until ready to use, at least 1 hour.

Using a thin knife, slice the chilled log crosswise into 1/8-inch thick slices and arrange them 1 1/2 inches apart on a cookie sheet. (If the dough is very soft, place the cookie sheet in the freezer 10 minutes to firm up.) Bake until the edges are just beginning to brown, about 20 minutes. With a thin metal spatula, transfer the cookies to a cooling rack. Cool completely before packing into a tin.

Alternative 2 (quicker method): Press into a pan, bake and slice into shortbread-style wedges or square. Press the dough into a 9-inch or 10-inch tart pan, preferably with a removable bottom, or an 8 or 9-inch square pan to cut into wedges or squares after baking. Prick the dough at two-inch intervals with the tines of a fork. Place the pan on a baking sheet and freeze for 10 to 15 minutes.

Bake until the edges are just beginning to brown and the center is no longer puffy, 30 to 35 minutes for 9-inch round or 8-inch square, about 25 to 30 minutes for 10-inch round or 9-inch square. Transfer the pan to a cooling rack and cool for 5 minutes. With a thin, sharp knife, carefully cut the shortbread rounds into wedges; cut squares into squares, rectangles or strips.

You can refrigerate the dough up to 2 weeks or freeze to 2 months; thaw in the refrigerator 8 hours before using.

Improvisations

Fleur de Sel Cookies

This fabulous cookie is a perfect example of the kind of free-association that can spur a cook's mind. The caramel flavors of the butter and brown sugar shortbread reminded me of a caramel I once tasted that had been sprinkled with a few grains of fleur de sel – the famous French sea salt that is said to have the faintest perfume of violets. The salt, a gentle surprise on the tongue, intensifies the flavor of caramel. Inspired, I took some of the salt out of the Brown Sugar Butter Cookie dough and sprinkled some fine sea salt on the surface just before baking: it's taste surprised and delighted. Use the best sea salt you can find with fine or flaky - not coarse - crystals. Maldon sea salt is a particularly nice one.

Prepare Ethereal Brown Sugar Butter Cookie dough using only a pinch of salt in place of the scant 1/4 teaspoon. Shape the dough as desired into rounds (sliced from a chilled log) or press into a pan; chill. Just before baking, sprinkle the cookies evenly with a *scant 1/4 teaspoon of sea salt*. Press lightly into the dough. Bake in a 325' oven until the edges are just beginning to brown.

Earl Grey Tea Cookies

Earl Grey tea is flavored with bergamot, a fragrant essential oil from the peel of a small acidic orange. The tea itself makes a spectacular, very surprising, and very adult flavoring for butter cookies.

In a food processor, combine *1 stick (1/2 cup) cold unsalted butter, cut into pieces, 3 tablespoons light brown sugar, 2 tablespoons granulated sugar, a scant 1/4 teaspoons coarse Kosher salt, 1 teaspoon vanilla and 4 teaspoons finely ground Earl Grey tea* (Cut open 4 tea bags and extract the tea, or if using loose tea, grind it to a powder in a blender or clean coffee grinder). Process to a light, fluffy paste, 20 to 30 seconds. Remove the lid and add *3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons flour and 3 tablespoons cornstarch*. Pulse until the dough begins to clump together and the mixture is fairly uniform, 8 to 10 times. Gather the dough together into a rough ball, kneading a few times if necessary.

Shape the dough as desired into rounds (sliced from a chilled log) or press into a pan; chill. Bake in a 325' oven until the edges are just beginning to brown.

Holton's Coffee Vanilla Bean Cookies

I created this recipe for my friend Holton, to recreate the flavors of a delectable cookie we had tasted years before - a gift from an acquaintance who never told us where she got them. I divined my way in version after version - fine-tuning the balance of flavors - until I had the subtle blend of coffee, caramel and vanilla. For more-overtly-coffee cookies, increase the instant coffee to 2 or 3 teaspoons; omit the vanilla bean and just use vanilla extract.

Pour *2 teaspoons Kahlua* in a small bowl and stir in *1 teaspoon instant espresso powder*; set aside. In a food processor, combine *1 stick (1/2 cup) cold unsalted butter, cut into pieces, 1/4 cup granulated sugar, 1 tablespoon light brown sugar, and a scant 1/4 teaspoons coarse Kosher salt*. With a thin, sharp knife, slice *1/2 of a vanilla bean* in half lengthwise; scrape out the seeds and add to the sugar. Process to a light, fluffy paste, 20 to 30 seconds. Add the Kahlua mixture and process until combined. Remove the lid and add *3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons flour and 3 tablespoons cornstarch*. Pulse until the dough begins to clump together and the mixture is fairly uniform, 8 to 10 times. Gather the dough together into a rough ball, kneading a few times if necessary. Gather the dough together into a rough ball, kneading a few times if necessary.

Shape the dough as desired into rounds (sliced from a chilled log) or press into a pan; chill. Bake in a 325' oven until the edges are just beginning to brown.

Shortbread Pastry Shells and Lids for Tarts

Unbaked Ethereal Brown Sugar Butter Cookie dough makes an easy-to-work pastry dough for dessert tarts. To give it a more neutral, less caramel flavor, use half granulated sugar and half light brown sugar in the dough.

Make *1 recipe Ethereal Brown Sugar Butter Cookie dough*; do not chill. Press the dough into a 10-inch tart tin with a removable bottom, building up the edge slightly to make a 1/4-inch high rim. Or make six individual tartlet shells by pressing the dough into 4-inch tart tins, building up the edges in the same way. Chill 1/2 hour before filling and /or baking. To bake without a filling, bake in a 325' until the edges are just beginning to brown, 30 to 35 minutes; cool before filling.

To make individual pastry lids for freeform tarts, don't build up the edge when you press the dough into tartlet tins; just bake them as flat disks you can pop out of the tins and use to top individual portions of cooked fruit, such as Boozy Prunes in Armagnac (page 00) or Warm "Wild" Blackberries or Blueberries (page 00), along with some whipped cream.

Brown Sugar Lime Curd Tart

The Caribbean origins of brown sugar and lime inspired me pair the Brown Sugar Short Bread baked in a tart tine with a light, tart lime curd to make this charming tart. Make the Lime Curd filling up to 5 days ahead. In a pinch, use good-quality, store-bought lemon curd, stirring in a few teaspoons fresh lemon juice to make it sufficiently tart.

Prepare the *Lime Curd*, below, and chill. Prepare the dough from *Brown Sugar Short Bread Cookies*. Follow the directions for forming and baking a 10-inch tart shell in Shortbread Pastry Shells and Lids.

Within 1 hour of serving, gently *fold 1/4 to 1/2 cup Whipped Cream, Whipped Crème Fraîche or sour cream* into the Lime Curd. Spread evenly over the tart shell. Serve with whipped cream on the side.

Lime Curd

Citrus curds made from lemon, limes or oranges are really custards: fresh juice thickened with eggs and sugar. Traditionally a lot of butter is beaten in, which makes them rather heavy and very rich. Leaving out the butter yields a much lighter, more ethereal curd with a clear, tart flavor. Use this method to make lemon curd or Meyer lemon curd; just adjust the sugar accordingly.

For the Lime Curd you'll need *1/2 cup fresh lime juice* (Key limes are particularly good). In a small bowl, sprinkle *1/2 teaspoon unflavored gelatin* over 2 tablespoons of the lime juice. Set aside to soften.

In a medium stainless steel bowl, or top of a double boiler, combine the remaining lime juice and *7 tablespoons sugar, 1 egg, 1 egg white, and one 3-by-1-inch strip lime zest*. Set the bowl over, but not in, simmering water. Whisk constantly until the curd is thick and coats the back of a spoon, about 5 minutes. Stir in the gelatin mixture and cook 1 minute longer. Strain into a medium bowl and allow to cool to room temperature, whisking occasionally. Discard the zest and transfer to a clean, dry jar, cover and refrigerate until ready to use.