

Andes Mint Cookies

Winner of the drop cookie category in 2012. From Marielle and Frank Curcio of Wake Forest.

3/4 cup butter or margarine

1-1/2 cups brown sugar, packed

2 tablespoons water

12-ounce package semisweet chocolate chips

2 eggs

2-1/2 cups flour

1-1/4 teaspoons baking soda

1/2 teaspoon salt

3 (4.6-ounce) boxes Andes mints

HEAT butter, brown sugar and water in saucepan until butter is melted. Remove from heat and add chocolate chips, stirring until melted. Pour into a large bowl and cool 10 minutes.

MIX eggs into chocolate mixture, then add flour, soda and salt and stir just until blended.

CHILL dough for an hour. (Don't worry that the dough seems a little bit oily; it turns out fine once baked.)

HEAT oven to 350 degrees. Line cookie sheets with parchment paper or silicone baking pads. Roll dough into 1-inch balls and place 2 inches apart on cookie sheet.

BAKE cookies for about 11 minutes or when the small cracks that form on the cookies look a little wet inside. Remove from oven and immediately place an Andes mint on each cookie. After they melt, swirl each one with an offset spatula (think of it like spreading frosting on a cake but with an Andes mint instead). Remove cookies from cookie sheet and let them cool until chocolate is solid.

Yield: about 60-70 cookies.

Buckeyes

Honorable mention winner in the chocolate category in 2012. From Anne Brill of Cary.

2 sticks margarine at room temperature

16-ounce jar creamy peanut butter

1 pound powdered sugar

2 cups finely ground graham crackers

24 ounces semisweet chocolate chips

4 tablespoons shortening

MIX peanut butter and margarine together in a medium-sized bowl with an electric mixer until the mixture is creamy. Gradually beat in powdered sugar. Then stir in the graham cracker crumbs, mixing thoroughly. Roll into walnut-sized balls and chill in the freezer for 10 to 15 minutes while you make the dipping chocolate.

MELT half of the chocolate chips with 2 tablespoons shortening in either a bowl set over a saucepan of simmering water, stirring occasionally, or in the microwave, on high in 20-second intervals, stirring between intervals. (Dipping takes awhile, and chocolate can harden so it is best to make the dipping chocolate in two batches.)

SPEAR each peanut butter ball with a toothpick or small skewer, dip into chocolate, covering three-quarters of each ball. Place on waxed paper and use your finger to press lightly on the ball, covering the hole left by the toothpick to make it disappear. Chill in refrigerator to set the chocolate coating. Keep in refrigerator, garage or other cool place until ready to serve.

Yield: about 70 balls.

New Zealand Holly Cookies

2012 grand prize winner. From Erin Czmiel of Cary.

2 cups all-purpose flour

1 cup sugar

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

3/4 teaspoon baking powder

1/4 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup butter, or 8 tablespoons

1 slightly beaten egg

1/4 cup milk, plus 2 to 3 tablespoons, divided

2 cups sifted powdered sugar

1/2 teaspoon vanilla

Green and red food coloring

2/3 cup raspberry jam

HEAT oven to 375 degrees.

COMBINE flour, sugar, cinnamon, baking powder and salt in a medium mixing bowl. Use two butter knives or a pastry cutter to cut butter into the flour mixture until the size of small peas. Make a well in the center. Combine egg and 1/4 cup milk; add all at once to the flour-butter mixture. Stir until moistened.

ROLL dough to 1/8-inch thickness on a lightly floured surface. Use 2-inch round or star cookie cutter to cut

dough. Place on ungreased cookie sheet. Bake for 8 to 10 minutes or until the bottom is brown. Cool on a wire rack.

PLACE about 1/2 teaspoon raspberry jam on the bottom of cookie and top with another cookie. Repeat with remaining cookies.

STIR powdered sugar, vanilla and 2 to 3 tablespoons milk in a small bowl to create a glaze. Spread on top of each sandwich cookie. Use a paintbrush to paint a few holly leaves and a stem with the green food coloring and holly berries with the red food coloring.

Yield: about 45 sandwich cookies.

World Peace Cookies

Winner of the chocolate category in 2012. From Bruce Nawrocki of Raleigh. This recipe originates from award-winning cookbook author Dorie Greenspan's book, "Baking: From My Home to Yours" (Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

1-1/4 cups all-purpose flour

1/3 cup unsweetened cocoa powder

1/2 teaspoon baking soda

1 stick plus 3 tablespoons (11 tablespoons) unsalted butter, at room temperature

2/3 cup packed light brown sugar

1/4 cup sugar

1/2 teaspoon fleur de sel or **1/4 teaspoon** fine sea salt

1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

5 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped into chips, or a generous **3/4 cup** store-bought mini chocolate chips

SIFT flour, cocoa and baking soda together. Set aside.

BEAT batter on medium speed until soft and creamy in a stand mixer, preferably fitted with a paddle attachment, or with a hand mixer in a large bowl. Add both sugars, salt and vanilla extract and beat for 2 minutes more. Turn off the mixer.

POUR in dry ingredients, drape a kitchen towel over the stand mixer to protect yourself and your kitchen from flying flour, and pulse mixer at low speed about 5 times, a second or two each time. Take a peek: If there is still a lot of flour on the surface of the dough, pulse a couple more times; if not, remove the towel. Continuing at low speed, mix for about 30 seconds more, just until the flour disappears into the dough; for the best texture, work the dough as little as possible once the flour is added, and don't be concerned if the dough looks a little crumbly. Toss in the chocolate pieces and mix only to incorporate.

TURN dough out onto a work surface, gather it together and divide it in half. Working with one half at a time, shape the dough into logs that are 1-1/2 inches in diameter. Wrap logs in plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 3 hours. (The dough can be refrigerated up to 3 days or frozen for up to 2 months. If you freeze the dough, you

will not have to defrost it before baking; just slice the logs into cookies and bake the cookies 1 minute longer.)

CENTER a rack in the oven and heat to 325 degrees. Line two baking sheets with parchment or silicone mats.

SLICE logs into rounds that are 1/2 inch thick, using a sharp, thin knife. (The rounds are likely to crack as you're cutting them. Don't be concerned, just squeeze the bits back onto each cookie.) Arrange rounds on the baking sheets, leaving about 1 inch between them.

BAKE cookies one sheet at a time for 12 minutes; they won't look done, nor will they be firm, but that's the way they should be. Transfer the baking sheet to a cooling rack, and let the cookies rest until they are only just warm, at which point you can serve them or let them reach room temperature.

Yield: 36 cookies.

Cream Wafers

This recipe, printed in the "Betty Crocker Cookbook," (General Mills Corp, 1972) won the slice and bake category in 2012. From Virginia Walker of Apex and Molly Beeke of Raleigh.

1-1/4 cup soft butter, divided

1/3 cup whipping cream

2 cups all-purpose flour

3/4 cup powdered sugar

1 teaspoon vanilla

Green or red food coloring

Granulated sugar

MIX 1 cup butter, cream and flour together in a standing mixer or in a medium bowl with electric mixer. Pull dough together into one ball, wrap with plastic wrap and chill in refrigerator.

HEAT oven to 375 degrees. Divide dough into thirds. Roll out a third of the dough at a time to 1/8-inch thickness on a flour-covered surface. Keep remaining dough in refrigerator until ready to roll. Cut into 1-1/2-inch circles.

TRANSFER rounds to a small bowl filled with granulated sugar. Toss rounds in sugar until both sides are coated. Place on an ungreased cookie sheet. Prick each round with fork about 4 times. Bake 7 to 9 minutes or just until set but not brown. Cool.

CREAM 1/4 cup butter, powdered sugar and vanilla in standing mixer or in bowl with electric mixer until smooth and fluffy. If needed, add a few drops of water for proper spreading consistency. Tint with a few drops of desired food color.

SPREAD a dollop of the frosting on the bottom of one cookie and top with another, creating a sandwich cookie. Continue until you run out of cookies or frosting.

Yield: About 60 sandwich cookies.

Sweet Carolina Biscotti

Honorable mention winner in 2012. From Victoria Larraz of Raleigh.

1 cup whole pecans

1-3/4 cups all-purpose flour

1/2 cup yellow cornmeal

1-1/4 teaspoons baking powder

1/4 teaspoon salt

2 eggs

3/4 cup sugar

1/2 cup vegetable oil

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Cooking or baking spray

1 cup milk chocolate chips, preferably Ghiardelli

HEAT oven to 400 degrees.

BLANCH pecans in boiling water for 2 minutes. Drain, rinse and towel dry. Spread pecans on an ungreased baking sheet and toast for 7 minutes. Cool. Chop pecans and set aside. Reduce oven temperature to 350 degrees.

COMBINE flour, cornmeal, baking powder, salt and chopped pecans in large bowl. In another bowl, stir together eggs, sugar and vegetable oil. Gradually add egg mixture to flour mixture, stirring just until the dry ingredients are moistened.

DIVIDE dough in half. With lightly-floured hands and on a lightly-floured surface, shape each portion into a 12-inch by 2-inch log. Spray cookie sheet with baking or cooking spray. Place logs three inches apart on greased cookie sheet. Bake for 25 to 30 minutes. Cool 10 minutes.

CUT each log diagonally into 3/4-inch slides with a serrated knife. Return slices cut side down to the baking sheet. Bake for 7 minutes. Turn slices and bake 7 more minutes. Set aside to cool completely.

MELT chocolate chips in a bowl set over a saucepan of simmering water. Stir occasionally. Dip bottoms of the biscotti in the melted chocolate or spread chocolate on one side of the biscotti. Set upside down on wax paper to harden the chocolate.

Yield: 12-15 cookies.