

Cookie master: Prepare holiday treat with chef Curtiss Hemm

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Chef Curtiss Hemm is dean of culinary arts at New England Culinary Institute. Classically trained in both North America and France, he has taught culinary arts for more than a decade, including courses in garde manger, culinary presentation, contemporary cuisine and kitchen management.

Chef Curtiss is the author of "Garde Manger: The Cold Kitchen" and the soon-to-be-released "Pink Ribbon Cooking: Simple, Healthy Recipes When Breast Cancer Invites Itself to Dinner." His wife, Bridget, is a four-year survivor of breast cancer.

"The holiday season is rich with family, friends, festivities and feasts! The first of December brings my favorite culinary season front-and-center; I truly enjoy my time in the kitchen cooking for those closest to me. However, over the course of the month I begin to wane from the exuberance and begin to wish for less excess and a more sensible approach to food, in particular the need to have overly sweet treats at the ever ready. By the time Christmas comes around, I am ready for a balanced and light dessert.

"This Italian-inspired holiday cookie is a great end-of-season recipe since it is not too sweet, nor is it savory. It walks a very tight line in being a dessert at all. As with many aspects of Italian cuisine this recipe is a characteristic expression of sensibility and an appreciation for good food that begins with great ingredients.

"Happy holidays!"

--Chef Curtiss

ITALIAN PINE NUT CHRISTMAS COOKIES

TIPS

Be sure the butter is unsalted and at room temperature.

Use the highest-grade vanilla extract available (I like Nielsen-Massey, a Madagascar vanilla extract. It's expensive but worth the price).

For perfectly shaped cookies, chill the dough thoroughly before baking (as much as 3 days beforehand).

TOOLS

Stand or hand-held electric mixer

Mortar and pestle

Nonstick silicone pad or parchment paper

2 professional, heavy-gauge cookie sheets

THE RECIPE

1 stick (4 oz.) butter, unsalted, at room temperature 1/2 c. organic cane sugar 1 t. pure vanilla extract 1 1/2 t. coarsely ground fennel seed (I use a mortar and pestle) 1 t. kosher salt 1 large egg, preferably farm fresh 1 c. all-purpose flour 1/4 c. yellow corn meal 1/4 c. pine nuts

In the bowl of a stand mixer or using an electric mixer, beat the butter, sugar, vanilla, coarse ground fennel seed and salt until fluffy and double in volume.

Beat in the egg until it is well incorporated. Add flour and cornmeal and mix on low until just incorporated.

Transfer the dough to a sheet of wax paper or plastic wrap (the dough will be somewhat tacky and difficult at this stage). Shape into a rough log about 1 inch in diameter and wrap to cover. Place in refrigerator for 2 to 3 hours to chill the dough (you can do this step up to 3 days in advance as it sets the liquid and dry ingredients, allowing for the perfect spread as the cookie bakes).

Preheat an oven to 350 degrees. Line two cookie sheets with nonstick silicone pads or parchment paper. Remove and discard the wrapping from the cookie log and slice into 1/4 -inch thick rounds. Place each round on the cookie sheet in even and well-spaced rows (the cookies will spread slightly and the space allows for more even cooking). Press a small pinch of pine nuts into each cookie.

Place both cookie sheets in the oven. Rotate the sheets after 6 minutes: pull out the top sheet, move the bottom sheet up to the center rack and then pull that once you have off-loaded the cookies from the first sheet. Bake until the cookie base is golden brown (approximately 12-15 minutes).

Remove from the oven and carefully transfer the cookies to a cooling rack. Cool to room temperature. Store in a well-sealed container.

VARIATION:

Substitute the zest of 1 lemon and 1 tablespoon of chopped fresh rosemary in place of the pine nuts. Add the zest and rosemary to the batter at the same time as the flour and cornmeal.

Serve with brut prosecco or other dry sparkling wine.

Yield: 2 to 3 dozen cookies.

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