The Christmas season is once again upon us, and it’s time to get busy! Shopping, wrapping, decorating, cooking, and don't forget those holiday cards. Here's hoping for a blessed and bountiful holiday season!

**Holiday Fun Facts**

In this area, December is best known as Christmas month, but there are many other holidays that fall in December. Whether you celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah, Advent, Three Kings Day, Kwanzaa, Boxing Day, or Fiesta of Our Lady of Guadalupe, there's plenty to do this month.

Fun facts:

- “It's a Wonderful Life” was a box-office bomb when it was released in 1949, losing $525,000 (which was a lot of money back then...) but has become one of the most watched, and loved, Christmas movies of all time. Director Frank Capra and stars Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed said this was their favorite film they ever made!
- Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights, falls on December 22-30 this year. It's marked by lighting a series of 8 candles to commemorate the miracle of 1 day's worth of oil lasting 8 days in an ancient temple reclaimed and rededicated from the Syrians during the 2nd century BC. Latkes, jelly donuts, brisket, and other tasty treats are some traditional fare.
- Kwanzaa, December 26-January 1, is a holiday created by Dr. Maulana Karenga in 1966 to commemorate and bring together values and practices of Continental African and African American cultures. The 7-day holiday is organized around the Seven Principles of Unity, Self-Determination, Collective Work & Responsibility, Cooperative Economics, Purpose, Creativity, and Faith.

Some traditional Christmas foods from around the world:

- Italy - Feast of the Seven Fishes, Panettone
- Sweden - Smörgåsbord of hot & cold dishes
- Japan - Kentucky Fried Chicken (honest!!!)
- Puerto Rico, Philippines - Roast Suckling Pig
- France - Bûche de Noël (Yule Log cake)
- Central America and Mexico - Tamales
- Germany - Roast Goose
- England - Mince Pie & steamed Christmas Pudding
- Australia - Ham and Shrimp on the Barbie

All sound pretty yummy to me!!

**Technique of the Month**

What would the holiday season be without cookies?? Drop, rolled and cut, bar, no-bake, pressed or formed, iced, filled, sandwiched, cakey, chewy, moist, crispy, spicy...I could go on for hours!!
This month’s technique deals with producing the best cookies by using a few simple tricks and tips.

1. Be realistic. Everyone dreams of making the most intricate, highly decorated fancy cookies found on Pinterest but don't start unless you have lots of time, money, decorating experience, and the right equipment. Style points don't matter to your recipients as long as your cookies are fresh, tasty, and given with love!
2. Read your recipe thoroughly. Then read it again, as many times as it takes until you are totally comfortable with the ingredients and directions.
3. Gather up your ingredients and equipment before you even turn on the oven. Those last-minute trips to the store take all the fun out of the process!!
4. Be careful with substitutions. Baking recipes are precise, and making a major change to one ingredient can throw off the entire batch. There is a specific ratio of ingredients that will ensure success if followed to the letter. You can feel free to make changes in brands of ingredients, adding different flavorings or colorings to your doughs, swapping some or all of your chocolate chips for peanut butter or butterscotch chips, adding sprinkles or chopped nuts, etc., but don't change the basic flour–sugar–leavening–fat–liquid ratios!
5. Some cookie dough recipes need to be chilled before further handling prior to shaping and baking. If your recipe asks for you to wrap and chill, DO IT!! Some cookies, such as rolled sugar or high–fat drop cookies, will not hold their shape if they're too warm when placed in the oven. The butter will melt much too quickly and spread, losing all your sharp edges and details.
6. Invest in some sturdy sheet pans, a few different sized cookie scoops, some large cooling racks and a roll of parchment paper. A medium-weight half size sheet pan (approx. 13” x 18”) will last for years and be strong enough to prevent warping. Cookie scoops are made to go through heavy doughs and will ensure your cookies are identically sized so they'll bake evenly. A rack is needed to properly cool down cookies without sticking to pans, and parchment liner in your sheet pan will ensure cookies will slide right out instead of sticking.
7. Cool down your sheet pan between batches of cookies to prevent overbaking or melting the dough. The best way to cool them down quickly without ruining the parchment pan liner is to remove the paper, turn pan upside down, run cool water over the pan bottom, avoiding the inside, and put liner back in the pan.
8. Last, and most important, preheat your oven! Make sure you're at optimum temperature before sliding that pan into the oven, as baked goods will not rise, brown, or bake properly if placed in a cool oven. Invest in an inexpensive oven thermometer and use it on a dry run prior to baking to verify your oven’s temperature is correct. Make any necessary adjustments to your temperature setting to ensure proper baking.

Recipes

One way that you can make sure you have a great assortment of cookies without baking until the cows come home is to organize and be part of a cookie swap. Get with 6 to 12 of your friends and/or family, discuss and assign each member a single variety of cookie (so you don't have 11 varieties of chocolate chip and 1 dozen sugar), have them bake 1 dozen for each group member (6 to 12 dozen of one kind), then get together and everyone swaps a dozen until you end up with a lot of different cookies.

Here are a few of my favorites, so get organized, dive in, and have fun!!!
**Drop Cookies**
Drop cookies are some of the easiest cookies to make. They are quite simply mixed, dropped or scooped onto a sheet pan, and baked. This particular one is fantastic - crispy, chewy, a perfect blend of coconut, fruit, and nuts!

**Chewy Granola Cookies**
Yield: 2 to 3 dozen cookies

1 cup butter, softened to room temperature  
½ cup packed light brown sugar  
¼ cup granulated sugar  
2 large eggs  
1 tsp. Vanilla extract  
1 ½ cups white whole wheat OR all-purpose flour  
½ tsp. Baking soda  
¼ tsp. Salt  
3 cups granola - any brand will work  
½ cup dried fruit - cranberries, blueberries, chopped dried cherries or raisins  
½ cup chopped almonds  
½ cup chopped cashews or pecans  
½ cup shredded coconut  
½ cup mini chocolate chips

Preheat oven to 350°. Line baking sheets with parchment and set aside.

Cream together the butter and sugars until light and fluffy, 2 to 3 minutes. Add eggs and vanilla and blend until batter lightens in color, about 1 to 2 minutes.

In a separate bowl, whisk together flour, baking powder and salt. Add to wet ingredients and mix until just combined (a few dry streaks are ok).

With a wooden spoon, stir in granola, dried fruits, nuts, coconut, and chocolate chips until combined. Scoop balls of dough, about 2 Tbsp. in size (#40 cookie scoop) onto prepared baking sheets, spacing a couple of inches apart. Lightly press down to flatten just a bit.

Bake 10-12 minutes. Remove cookies to a cooling rack immediately and cool completely. Note: some melted white or dark chocolate pieces can be drizzled over the cookies for a fancier look.

**Rolled & Cut Cookies**
One of the best holiday cookies ever, and especially fun with the kids, is the gingerbread roll & cut cookie. Spicy gingerbread people, animals, rounds, candy canes, etc. are fun to bake and decorate with icings, candy pieces, sprinkles, coconut, or whatever you wish! For best results, buy fresh spices and keep dough chilled. Scraps can be gathered, refrigerated, and re-rolled until it’s gone.

**Gingerbread Cookies**
Yield: approx. 2 dozen cookies

3 cups flour  
2 tsp. Ground ginger  
1 tsp. Ground cinnamon
Mix flour, ginger, cinnamon, baking soda, nutmeg and salt in a large bowl. Beat butter and brown sugar in a separate bowl with an electric mixer on medium speed until light and fluffy. Add molasses and egg; beat well. Gradually beat in flour mixture on low speed until well mixed. Press dough into two thick flat disks. Wrap each in plastic wrap and refrigerate a minimum of 4 hours, or overnight.

Preheat oven to 350°. Roll out each half of the dough into ¼” thickness on a lightly floured work surface. Cut into desired shapes with 5” cookie cutter. Place 1” apart on parchment-lined cookie sheets. (I like to pop the baking sheets into the refrigerator or freezer for a couple of minutes before placing into the oven to make sure the cookies hold their shape a little bit better.)

Bake 8 to 10 minutes, or until edges of cookies are set and just beginning to brown. Cool on baking sheets for about 2 minutes. Remove cookies to wire racks to cool completely. Decorate cooled cookies as desired. Store cookies in airtight container up to 5 days.

**Bar Cookies**
There are so many varieties of cookie bars. Some are specifically created to make layered bars, and some are just an easy way to bake lots of drop cookies; press the dough into a lined jelly roll or rimmed sheet pan, bake, then cut into individual pieces! I’m sharing a recipe I love for Fruitcake Bars and no, it’s not that kind of fruitcake!! This is a fresh version, filled with the flavors of dried fruits, lots of nuts, and candied ginger.

**Fruitcake Bars**
Yield: Approx. 3 dozen

½ cup all purpose flour  
¼ tsp. Baking soda  
¼ tsp. Baking powder  
¼ tsp. Table salt  
¼ tsp. Ground cloves  
½ cup firmly packed light brown sugar  
2 cups coarsely chopped walnuts (pecans can be substituted)  
1 ¼ cups mixed dried fruit of choice (I like dried cherries, golden raisins, and dried apricots)  
¼ cup minced crystallized ginger  
1 large egg, lightly beaten  
1 Tbsp. butter, melted  
4 tsp. Brandy or vanilla extract  
1 cup sifted powdered sugar

Preheat oven to 350°. Lightly spray the bottom and sides of 8” square pan with cooking spray, then line with parchment paper, allowing 2” overhang on each side. Lightly spray parchment with more cooking spray. Set aside.
Stir together flour and next 4 ingredients in a large bowl; add sugar and next 3 ingredients, tossing to break up any clusters of dried fruit. Add egg, stirring until blended. Batter will be thick. Press into prepared pan.

Bake for 35 to 40 minutes or until set. Cool in the pan 20 minutes. Lift fruitcake from pan using overhanging paper as handles, and cool completely on a wire rack, about an hour.

Glaze: Place brandy or vanilla in bowl & blend with powdered sugar until smooth, Drizzle glaze over cooled fruitcake, and allow to set for 20 minutes before slicing. Cut into 1 ½” squares. Delicious!!!

**Pressed Cookies**
The most famous pressed or formed cookie must be the shortbread. There are lots of shortbread recipes, but I personally love the one that is a simple 3-ingredient cookie. Do yourself a favor when making these, and splurge for the really good butter (Kerrygold, Plugra, Challenge, etc) if you can. Butter is the main flavoring ingredient, and the better quality really shines through!

Note: If you want to get fancy, you can melt some good bittersweet or semisweet chocolate and dip the corners of each piece, then allow to dry on a piece of waxed paper or parchment.

**Scottish Shortbread Cookies**
Yield: Approx. 16 to 20 cookies

1 cup salted butter, softened  
½ cup powdered sugar, sifted to remove lumps  
2 cups all-purpose flour, not sifted  
Optional: ½ tsp. Vanilla extract

Preheat oven to 325°. Line two baking sheets with parchment and set aside.

Place all ingredients in a large bowl. Mix with electric mixer until completely combined and a dough forms. If you are having trouble getting the dough to form a cohesive ball, add a few drops of water until it comes together. Note: If using unsalted butter, add ¼ tsp. Table salt to mixture.

Roll out dough on a floured work surface to ¼” - ½” thickness, depending on preference. Use cookie cutters, biscuit cutter, or a pizza cutter to cut out desired shapes. Place on prepared baking sheets and pierce with a fork. Dough can also be divided and each rolled into an 8” circle, scored into wedges with a knife or pizza wheel, and placed in a parchment lined round 8” cake pan for baking.

Bake about 20 minutes, or until just lightly browned. Cool on a wire rack until completely cool. Store in an airtight container for about a week, or can be wrapped and stored in the freezer up to 4 weeks.