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TIME TO BAKE THE COOKIES!

What would this time of year be like without those tiny little delicacies that tempt our tastebuds and decorate our trays? Spicy little gingerbread men are one of the first cookies that come to mind in the early days of December.

Do you dread the rolling and the time consuming decorating of dozens of little gingerbread creatures? Plan a party for holiday cookie baking. Put on your favorite playlist, pop a bottle of sparkling cider and get creative mixing, decorating, and baking your favorite cookies to share during this festive season.

Use your favorite gingerbread recipe or the one featured. You prepare the dough, clear off the countertops and let the kids and guests take over! Use commercial ready to spread frosting or frosting tubes, raisins, nuts, etc., and have fun decorating! They may even want to use some of their creations as ornaments. Just make, bake and varnish. If you are planning to hang these cookies, use a tiny straw to prick a hole for a ribbon or an ornament hook.

When you need many cookies, but have little time, get out your jellyroll pan or your sheet cake pan and bake a batch of bar cookies. A bar cookie makes a quick and easy quantity of cookies usually with just one mixing bowl to clean! The Butter Pecan Turtles are fancy bars for your holiday entertaining.

Have you seen the Christmas mug with the statement --"Get Even, Give Fruitcake"? Well, even if you are not a fruitcake enthusiast, *I'll* bet you'll enjoy the Christmas Lizzie recipe that follows. This drop cookie recipe makes dozens of delicious fruity cookies.

One final recipe features a fat-free cookie! The Peppermint Meringue Kisses are light, sweet and attractive. Make the cookies fancy by using a pastry tube with a large star tip. Paint red food coloring in four stripes up the inside of the pastry bag. Fill with the meringue and squeeze the peppermint kisses onto the cookie sheet.

Make each part of this Holiday Season a joyous time for you and your family. Enjoy making your Christmas cookies together and sharing them with friends! For the cookie swap party or nursing home visits be sure to wrap each variety of cookie separately in plastic wrap so that flavors don't mingle.

For perfectly shaped round cookies pack homemade refrigerator cookie dough into clean 6-ounce juice cans (don't remove bottoms) and freeze dough. Thaw cookie dough about 15 minutes; then

open bottom of can and push up, using the top edge as a cutting guide. Spread some of that holiday cheer this season by trying some of the following cookie recipes.

GINGERBREAD MEN

1 cup shortening
1 cup firmly packed brown sugar
1 cup molasses
1 teaspoon vinegar
1 cup buttermilk
7 cups all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons baking soda
1 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon ground ginger
1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
Orange candy-coated chocolate pieces or candy corn

Cream shortening; gradually add sugar, beating at medium speed of an electric mixer until light and fluffy. Add molasses, beating well.

Combine vinegar and buttermilk.

Combine flour, soda, salt and spices. Add 2 cups flour mixture to creamed mixture; beat well. Add remaining flour mixture alternately with buttermilk mixture, beginning and ending with dry ingredients. Cover and chill dough at least 1 hour.

Roll dough to 1/4-inch thickness on a lightly floured surface. Cut with a 5-inch gingerbread man cutter. Place on ungreased cookie sheets; bake at 375° for 10 minutes. Remove from oven, and quickly press candies into dough as desired. Return to oven 1 minute. Cool on wire racks. Store in an airtight container. Yield: 40 cookies.

BUTTER PECAN TURTLES

1/2 cup butter or margarine, softened
1 cup firmly packed brown sugar
2 cups all-purpose flour
1 cup chopped pecans
1/2 cup butter or margarine, melted
1/2 cup firmly packed brown sugar
1 cup milk chocolate morsels

Cream 1/2 cup butter; add 1 cup brown sugar, beating at medium speed of an electric mixer. Gradually add flour, mixing well. Press mixture into an ungreased 13x9x2-inch pan. Sprinkle with pecans; set aside.

Combine 1/2 cup butter and 1/2 cup brown sugar in a small saucepan. Bring to a boil over medium heat, stirring constantly. Boil 30 seconds, stirring constantly. Remove from heat, and pour hot mixture over crust. Bake at 350° for 18 minutes or until bubbly. Remove from oven; immediately sprinkle with chocolate morsels. Let stand 2 to 3 minutes; cut through chocolate with knife to create a marbled effect. Cool. Cut into squares. Yield: 4 dozen.

CHRISTMAS LIZZIES

1/2 pound candied green pineapple, chopped
1 pound candied red cherries, chopped
2 (8-ounce) packages chopped dates
2 cups chopped pecans
1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour, divided
1/4 cup butter **or** margarine, softened
1/2 cup sugar
2 eggs
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon ground cloves
1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg
3 tablespoons milk
1 1/2 tablespoons bourbon flavoring

Combine fruit and pecans; dredge in 1 cup flour, and set aside.

Cream butter; add sugar, beating at medium speed of an electric mixer. Add eggs, and beat well. Combine remaining 1/2 cup flour, soda, and spices; add to creamed mixture, mixing well. Stir in milk and bourbon flavoring. Add fruit mixture, and mix well. Batter will be stiff. Chill dough at least 1 hour.

Drop chilled dough by heaping teaspoonfuls onto lightly greased cookie sheets. Bake at 300° for 20 to 25 minutes or until lightly browned. Cool on wire racks. Yield: about 8 dozen.

PEPPERMINT MERINGUE KISSES

3 egg whites
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/2 teaspoon peppermint
1/8 teaspoon salt
1 cup sugar
Vegetable cooking spray

Beat egg whites (at room temperature) in a large bowl at high speed of an electric mixer until foamy. Sprinkle flavorings and salt over egg whites; beat until soft peaks form. Gradually add sugar, 1 tablespoon at a time, beating until stiff peaks form.

Drop meringue by 2 level teaspoonfuls per cookie or pipe, using a No. 7 star tip, 1 inch apart onto cookie sheets that have been coated with cooking spray. Bake at 200° for 2 hours and 15 minutes or until dry. Cool slightly on cookie sheets; remove from cookie sheets, and cool completely on wire racks. Store in an airtight container. Yield: 6 1/2 dozen cookies (11 calories each).

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