



Christmas cookies nestle in a heavy-duty eight-inch square cake pan lined with unbleached parchment paper. Round sugar cookies are tied with jute string, tree-shaped cookies with braided straw. Fluted cupcake liners are repositories for shortbread wedges, almond crisps, pecan sandies, and Linzer cookies.

BOXES

COOKIE

How to make the most ubiquitous and delicious of Christmas gifts look as good as they taste.

Consider the poor Christmas cookie. Arguably the paradigm of seasonal spirit, it wants only to please, delighting our senses—taste, sight, and smell. But we commit heinous cookie crimes. After wading up to our elbows in butter and brown sugar, investing hours in the shaping and baking, we consign all that goodness to an old shoe box, an empty oatmeal canister, a used coffee can.

True, a gift of homemade macarons or truffles will be endearing to anyone accustomed to receiving the pedestrian tin of Danish butter cookies. But Christmas cookies lovingly prepared deserve packaging that befits their worth.

This radical idea was given flight by MSL editors Anne Johnson and Susan Spungen, who last year commissioned a metalsmith to make simple, elegant, lidded boxes of galvanized tin for their friends. At Christmas the boxes held a decadent array of cookies, and by New Year's they had relocated to desktops and bureaus as year-round receptacles for paper clips and jewelry. But such customizing is not required: The silvery theme can be replicated with pudding molds, paint boxes, and Pullman loaf pans, culled from hardware departments, art-supply stores, and kitchen shops. A humble bread pan is transformed into a vessel of almost classical beauty, dressed with bookbinder's tape or a swath of silk ribbon. This is the best kind of fakery: inexpensive that looks rich, practical that looks extravagant. Even cookie-less, they'd make good gifts.

But the cookies themselves are remarkable. The pecan sandies have a dense, buttery texture that melts in your mouth slowly, and the biscotti, with undertones of anise and fennel to counterpoint the flavors of pistachio and fig, are as sophisticated a Christmas cookie as will come out of any kitchen. You will notice the absence of

candied red cherries and green sprinkles. With containers this special, decorations can't be ordinary. Edible gold dust and dragées—small, round sugar decorations that look like miniature ornaments—were sprinkled on the tree-shaped sugar cookies. An egg-and-cream glaze made the star-shaped cookies shine.

Besides goodness, keeping ability is another consideration in choosing Christmas-cookie recipes. Cookies don't turn bad—they just lose whatever texture they have: Crunchy goes soggy, and soft gets hard. Shortbread will approximate a traditional butter cookie but is sturdier because it has no eggs, and a spongy biscotti can be thrown back in the oven to dry out a bit.

There are some caveats to setting up a home production line. Cookie experts rely on the deep organization called *mise en place*—a restaurateur's term that means being set up for service. Borrow lots of cookie sheets, and spray them with vegetable oil, which is faster than butter, or use parchment paper so you won't need to keep cleaning and regreasing the pans. Set out all your ingredients so you can dip into a bowl for two cups of flour or four ounces of ground almonds. You can safely double-batch these recipes, but don't try further multiples. Creaming or beating sugar and eggs thoroughly requires incorporating a lot of air, something you can't do with a big batter in a small mixer.

Once the baking frenzy ends, keep the cookies in airtight containers until just before they go into their gift boxes. That way the magic won't be lost. For surely a gift of these cookies, entrusted to the care of a perfect package, constitutes a kind of sorcery. An everyday object becomes an object of desire. And, for the child in all of us, magic is at the heart of this season.

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