

Around the world in cookies

By Kate Bernot December 6, 2011 11:10AM



The holiday season brings with it a host of inevitables: You will, no matter what, forget where you stashed the wrapping paper last year. You will, every year, shake your head at the number of presents your children receive. You will cringe, unfailingly, at each January's credit card bill.

Luckily, there are pleasantly ubiquitous traditions that are a delight to welcome back every December. For most families, holiday cookie baking is the prime example.

Each household has its classic cookies, whether gingerbread or frosted sugar or chocolate chip. But while some traditions are not to be altered, holiday baking benefits from an infusion of new recipes each year, especially when they borrow from other cultures.

At Delightful Pastries in Jefferson Park, owner Dobra Bielinski has made it her mission to stock the retro bakery cases with as many types of globally inspired cookies as she can. After a childhood spent in Poland, Vienna and South Africa, Bielinski has acquired a distinctly international approach to holiday treats.

"I think every culture has a fabulous cookie that should be included in my repertoire," she says. "We do Czech, Hungarian, Austrian, Sicilian, French, German, Mexican and American styles at the bakery. If there is a cookie out there, I usually know about it because I've tried to make it."

One of Bielinski's perennial favorites is a Mexican wedding cookie, a simple-to-make drop cookie with holiday flavors of toasted pecans and confectioners' sugar.

"As much as we call it a Mexican wedding cookie, it's also a quintessentially American cookie. In Texas, California, Arizona and New Mexico, traditionally everyone had pecan trees growing," Bielinski says. "People would make these for parties, hence the name Mexican wedding cookies."

The recipe is a simple one for families to make together, because fun and easy tasks like rolling the dough into balls and dunking it in confectioners' sugar are perfect ways for children to participate. The earthy, nutty flavor of the dough is complemented by the sweetness of the confectioners' sugar, an antidote to the overly frosted and glazed cookies that line shelves around this time of year.

While baking with family can be a way to explore other cultures' traditions, for some, ethnic recipes are all about reconnecting with one's roots.

At Sixteen, the restaurant in the Trump Tower Chicago, pastry chef Sarah Kosikowski is used to making delicate, refined confections and desserts. When she thinks of her favorite holiday cookie, though, it's her grandmother's rustic chrusciki (kroo-SHEE-kee), or "angel wings," that supply that ultimate dose of nostalgia.

"My great-grandmother lived in Detroit, and Christmas Eve was her big party every year. If you were the lucky one to be standing in the kitchen while she was frying the chrusciki, you'd have powdered sugar all over your mouth," Kosikowski remembers. "She would never make them ahead of time. Pierogies and other dishes, could make in advance, but not the chrusciki. It's something I remember always eating fresh."

The beautiful twists of dough that shape these Polish cookies must be fried in lard or other oil, then quickly tossed with confectioners' sugar. They will last on a tray for a few hours, but are best eaten while still warm before the sugar and fried dough harden like a funnel cake.

While adults watch batches of dough crisp to a golden brown in the fryer, younger children can be enlisted to dust sugar over the dough ribbons.

Kosikowski says the cookies are a perfect marriage of traditional rusticity and holiday elegance. After all, lard is hardly a refined cooking oil, but the shape of the cookies and their delicate sweetness elevate them to a dessert worthy of serving to company or giving as a gift.

"It's simple, but it's an example of the Old World tradition coming back," she says. "I am absolutely considering putting these on our Christmas brunch menu at Sixteen. We're still in the Midwest, where people love that sense of heritage and tradition."

Whether you're exploring other cultures' recipes or sticking to your own family's favorites, Bielinski says you can never go wrong by making a double batch of cookies.

"In this economy, all of us are forced to work harder for less money," she says. "When you take the time to bake something for someone else, even after a 50- or 60-hour work week, I think that says a lot."

Kate Bernot is a Chicago free-lance writer.