

Cooking with Chef Don

Gingerbread House

Gingerbread

5 cups all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons ginger
1 teaspoon nutmeg
1 cup shortening
1 ¼ cups molasses

1 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons cinnamon
1 teaspoon cloves
1 cup sugar
2 eggs, beaten

In large saucepan, melt shortening on stove over low heat. While shortening is melting, in a separate bowl stir together flour, salt and spices. When shortening is half melted, remove from heat and continue to stir until completely melted. Add sugar, molasses and beaten eggs. Mix well and quickly (to prevent eggs from cooking). Add molasses mixture to flour mixture. Mix well. Dough will be soft. Cover and refrigerate until firm enough to handle.

When dough is firm enough to handle, remove from refrigerator and let sit until room temperature (about an hour). Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

To prevent aluminum foil from slipping, wipe counter with wet sponge then smooth aluminum foil over damp counter. This will prevent the foil from slipping while dough is being rolled out.

Working with a small handful of dough (about the size of a baseball), roll dough onto aluminum foil that has been sprinkled with flour. Sprinkle dough with flour to prevent dough from sticking to rolling-pin.

IF DOUGH IS TOO STIFF, MICROWAVE FOR 10-15 SECONDS TO SOFTEN THE DOUGH.

Roll dough to about 1/8" thickness. Place gingerbread house pattern pieces onto dough and cut-out dough pieces (don't forget to cut out windows). A pizza cutter works great for cutting out walls and roof sections. Remove excess dough pieces. Lift entire piece of foil and place on large cookie sheet. Place cookie sheet in oven. Check frequently to prevent burning. Bake until golden brown. Large pieces may bake as long as 14 minutes. Smaller pieces might take 6 – 7 minutes.

When dough pieces are done baking, remove baking sheet from oven. Quickly lift foil from baking sheet and place on a flat area for gingerbread pieces to cool. If pieces have distorted while baking, while still warm, run knife or pizza cutter along sides of walls/roof sections to create a straight edge. If pieces have curled up during baking, while still warm, gently push edges down to lay flat. With gingerbread pieces still on the foil, let cool overnight. Next day – gently peel foil off of gingerbread pieces. You are now ready to assemble, or add windows!

Royal Icing

3 tablespoons meringue powder
1 pound powder sugar
1 teaspoon Vanilla or Almond flavoring

6 Tablespoons warm water
½ teaspoon cream of tartar

Note: 3 egg whites may be substituted for 3 tablespoons of meringue powder. Omit the water if using real egg whites.

Because this frosting dries quickly, and very hard, this is the recommended frosting to use for gluing together the walls and roof sections.

1. Keep all utensils completely grease-free. Combine all ingredients, mixing slowly with stationary mixer until peaks form. Beat at high speed for 7 to 10 minutes. This is important for the frosting to be soft enough to use with pastry bag.

2. This frosting is fast drying – keep bowl covered with a damp cloth. If icing is too thick when using fine tubes, add a few drops of water. For thicker icing, beat in a little extra confectioners sugar. Store leftover frosting, tightly covered, in the refrigerator for weeks. Rebeat before using again (if using real egg-whites, the frosting will not keep its cementing properties after the initial beating). This recipe makes about 3 ½ cups of glue frosting.



Frosting Tip: When working with egg whites or meringue powder, keep all utensils grease-free. Any oil or grease will break down the frosting mixture. Note that the "decorators frosting" contains grease (shortening). When decorating, it is helpful to keep one bag exclusively to be used for "glue frosting", and another bag to be used for the decorators frosting. This helps to keep grease away from the "glue frosting".

To Prepare Bag:

Unscrew coupler ring. Notice that the threads on the coupler start about 1/2 inch above the coupler tip. Push the coupler tip into bag, forcing it down as far as possible. With scissors, trim bag about 1/4 inch below bottom edge of coupler. Position decorating tip over coupler tip and bag. Screw ring in place to secure. To change tips, unscrew ring, replace tip and screw on ring.

To Fill Bag:

Cuff bag top over one hand while using your other hand to scoop in icing with spatula. Don't fill bag with more than 1/2 cup icing. Unfold cuff and twist top of bag closed, forcing icing down into bag and decorating tip. Release air bubbles before decorating by holding bag over icing bowl and squeezing until air is released. Tip: If decorating with children, it is helpful to place a rubber-band tightly around the top of the bag (where twisted) to prevent frosting from being squeezed out the wrong end. Frosting bags, tips, couplers, coloring and decorations may be purchased from most craft or Internet on-line stores.

Hard Candy

One of the quickest and easiest candies you can make! If using molds, be sure to use molds designed for high temperatures. Cook in a heavy saucepan, no more than two-quart capacity. This may be used to make windows for Gingerbread houses, but you have to work quick and safely - this mixture is VERY HOT and dries VERY FAST.

1 cup granulated cane sugar

1/3 cup light corn syrup

1/2 teaspoon oil-based flavoring (if desired)

1/3 cup hot water

1/2 teaspoon liquid food color (if desired)

Combine sugar, hot water and corn syrup in a heavy saucepan. Place on high heat and stir with a wooden spoon until all sugar crystals are dissolved. Wash down sides of pan with a pastry brush dipped in hot water. Clip on thermometer. Continue cooking, without stirring, to 290F, then remove from heat. Entire cooking process takes about ten minutes. If desired, add flavoring and food color and stir to blend.

If using for Gingerbread House windows - place your Gingerbread piece on aluminum foil and pour candy into the window area until desired window thickness.

For Gingerbread House ponds - On a non-stick cookie sheet - or well oiled cookie sheet - place a piece of blue paper that you've cut into your desired pond shape. Pour a puddle of clear hard candy onto the blue paper. This provides the look of depth, as you look through the clear candy onto the blue paper. Let harden (about 10 minutes) and then peel the hardened candy off of your cookie sheet and place on your Gingerbread yard.



Lighting your Gingerbread House

Lighting Set

Purchase a complete lighting set (bulb, base and cord) from a craft store. Look for the night-light kits that are used in night-light ceramics with a squeezable base (usually made of metal) instead of the screw-in kind. This type of night-light uses Christmas tree light bulbs or night-light bulbs. With this kind of night-light, simply squeeze the base and insert the light into the back of your gingerbread house (where you have pre-cut the hole before baking). Gently release the metal base. Usually the gingerbread is hard enough that the night-light base will be held firmly in place within the pre-cut circle.

String of Lights

Purchase a string of lights from most any store (the shortest strings work best - 10 lights). Use duct tape to tape the lights onto your base, making sure to place lights within the walls and/or around your house (if you want a "lit" fence). Heavily duct tape area where cord will exit the house to keep cord from moving and cracking exterior walls. When taping light string to base, try and position lights so they all face up. For the lights below, I used black electrical tape to tape every-other light down (so the light would not show through the decorations) because I wanted to use the spacing of every other light within my fence posts.

Edible Re-Bar

This is the coolest thing. Take a full bag of frosting with a #5 round tip. Take a long stick of spaghetti and stick it through the tip, into the bag. Pull the spaghetti right back out (which is now coated with frosting) and lay on wax paper to dry. You can cut this (or break it) into desired lengths. The spaghetti acts as re-bar providing reinforcement. This is a great idea for fences. Color the frosting black/gray for the look of wrought-iron.

Tips

Aluminum Foil - buy lots of it. This is an easy way to roll-out, transfer and bake your pieces. Cut a piece of foil the same size as your cookie sheet. Swipe your counter/table with a damp sponge. Lay the foil on top of the damp counter/table. This will prevent the foil from slipping around (too much water and the foil will slip - experiment and find the amount you need). Sprinkle the foil with flour, roll-out your dough, cut your pieces, lift the entire piece of foil onto your cookie sheet and bake. When done in the oven, remove the cookie sheet, transfer the foil to a flat surface (counter/table top works well) to let cool. Use a fresh piece of foil for each roll-out. (If it wasn't for this trick, I wouldn't be making Gingerbread Houses!)

Cutting your dough - use a Pizza Cutter. A pizza cutter provides a quick straight line for large pieces like walls and roofs.

Bake round/tube-shaped Gingerbread pieces. To bake round/tube/shaped Gingerbread pieces, what I do is find a metal tin the size of what the tube/tower/trunk should be (in diameter). I measure this tin to figure out how large the piece should be, if laid flat, to wrap around this tin (you can practice by wrapping the tin with paper and measuring the paper). I then cut out the dough based on this flat piece. I bake the piece (again, still flat, baking it on foil). As soon as the piece is done baking, I let it cool for about a minute or two (just cool enough to handle) I then drape it around the metal tin to finish cooling (foil and baked dough). When the piece is totally cool, I removed from the tin (sliding the tin out from the middle) and carefully removed the foil from the inside.

Poinsettias. With green frosting and a leaf tip, place leaves on the bottom of each window. With Red frosting and a flower tip, make red flowers on top of the green leaves. Place a yellow dot of frosting in the middle of each flower and you have nice Poinsettia flowers under each window.

