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Raspberry Meringues (or Banana Meringues)

Makes 25 to 30 meringues

What to do with those intriguing containers of freeze-dried fruit? Banana meringues are easy, airy, crunchy, flavorful, and unusual. Make them into dessert with juicy strawberries and whipped cream or crème fraîche and/or vanilla ice cream. Stop there or spoon on some *dulce de leche* and add a handful of toasted pecans. If it's a diet day, cut the *dulce*, stick with the strawberries, and trade in the cream or ice cream for yogurt. Still seriously good. Raspberry meringues are pink and especially tasty with nuts and chocolate.

INGREDIENTS:

1/2 cup (0.75 ounce) freeze-dried banana slices or 1/3 cup (0.45 ounce) freeze-dried raspberries
1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons (4.375 ounces) sugar
3 large egg whites, at room temperature
1/8 teaspoon cream of tartar

EQUIPMENT:

Cookie sheets, lined with parchment paper
Mortar and pestle or food processor
Large pastry bag fitted with a 1/2-inch or larger plain or star tip (optional)

Preheat the oven to 200°F. Position racks in the upper and lower thirds of the oven.

Pulverize the fruit with 2 tablespoons of the sugar with a mortar and pestle or in a food processor. Set aside.

In a clean dry bowl with an electric mixer, beat the egg whites and cream of tartar on medium speed until soft peaks form when the beaters are lifted. On high speed, gradually add the remaining sugar about a tablespoon at a time, taking 1 to 1-1/2 minutes. The mixture should stand in stiff peaks when the beaters are lifted. Use a rubber spatula to fold in the reserved sugar-fruit powder just until incorporated. Scoop heaping teaspoons of batter and place 2 inches apart onto the lined cookie sheets. Or scrape the batter into the pastry bag and pipe "kisses" or any size or shape you like.

Bake for 2 hours. Rotate the pans from top to bottom and from front to back halfway through the baking time to ensure even baking. Remove a test cookie and let it cool completely before taking a bite. (Meringues are never crisp when hot). If the cookie is completely dry and crisp, turn off the oven and let the cookies cool in the oven. If the test cookie is soft or chewy or sticks between your teeth, leave the oven on for another 15 or 20 minutes. Cool the meringues in the turned-off oven. To prevent the meringues from becoming moist and sticky, put them in an airtight container as soon as they are cool. May be stored airtight for at least 2 months.



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UPGRADES:

Banana Pecan Meringues: Fold 2/3 cup (2.33 ounces) coarsely chopped, lightly toasted pecans into the batter with the banana powder and sugar. Shape with a spoon.

Coconut Banana Meringues: Fold 1/3 cup (1 ounce) toasted unsweetened dried shredded coconut into the batter with the banana powder and sugar. If desired, sprinkle the meringue (before baking) with dried shaved coconut (coconut chips). Shape with a spoon.

Raspberry Meringues with Nuts and Chocolate: Fold 2/3 cup (2.33 ounces) coarsely chopped walnuts, pecans, or toasted almonds and 2/3 cup (4 ounces) chopped semisweet or bittersweet chocolate or chocolate chips into the batter with the raspberry powder and sugar. Shape with a spoon.