

Almond-Orange Tree Cookies

Makes about 30 large trees, 5-inch; or a forest of tiny trees

Evergreen trees are a ubiquitous symbol of the holiday season! Rooted in the notion of life in the midst of cold and darkness, we celebrate trees, inside and out, as a symbol of the solstice and Christmas. It's natural, then, to find their likeness on the holiday cookie plate. But, it's not enough to be beautifully decorated, a holiday cookie needs to taste good, too! We've taken a basic sugar cookie and added texture and flavor with a few "tree-grown ingredients," chopped almonds, almond extract, and plenty of orange zest. The combination of flavors returns a special holiday taste that you'll love!

Ingredients:

1-1/2 cups sugar
1 tablespoon orange zest
1-1/2 cups (3 sticks) unsalted butter, room temperature
2 eggs
1 tablespoon pure vanilla extract
1-1/2 teaspoons almond extract
5-1/2 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 cup finely chopped almonds (or almond meal)
1 teaspoon salt

Directions:

1. Measure the sugar and spread onto a dinner plate. Zest the orange over the sugar. Rub the zest and the sugar together with your fingertips.
2. In a large mixing bowl, or the bowl of a stand mixer, combine the softened butter and orange-sugar together until it becomes light and fluffy.
3. Add the eggs, vanilla and almond extracts to the butter-sugar mixture and continue beating until evenly combined. Scrape down the sides periodically as needed.
4. In a small bowl, mix the flour, finely chopped almonds (or almond meal), and salt together until evenly combined. Add the flour mix, one-third at a time, to the butter-sugar mixture on low speed until thoroughly mixed.
5. Gather the dough into a rough ball, and divide in half. Flatten each half into an oval that's about 1/2-inch thick. (The oval shape provides an advantage in the rolling step.) Wrap each oval well and chill for an hour or up to 3 days. The dough may also be frozen at this stage for later use.

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6. Remove a dough disk from the refrigerator and allow to soften slightly at room temperature until it rolls out easily to a 1/4-inch thickness. Use a pastry mat or piece of parchment paper as a rolling surface. Dust with flour as needed, but sparingly so. Re-chill the rolled out dough for 15-20 minutes. Chilling will help cut and retain detailed shapes in the next step. Repeat with the second disk.
7. Cut out shapes from each chilled, rolled sheet of dough. Place the shapes, leaving space in between each cookie, on a lined baking sheet (lined with a silicone baking mat, or parchment paper), and chill in the refrigerator for 15-20 minutes before baking; this will minimize spreading in the initial baking phase, and help to retain the detail in the shapes.
8. Combine scraps from the first cutting of both sheets and roll out again, chill, and cut additional shapes. Repeat until all the dough is prepared. (The less re-rolling of dough, the better it is for a tender cookie).
9. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Bake the chilled, cut-out shapes for 12-14 minutes or until a light fingertip press in the center of the cookie springs back. (For smaller cookies, bake for less time.) Don't allow more than a hint of browning to occur.
10. Allow the cookies to set by cooling on the pan for 5 minutes, then transfer to a cooling rack for completion of the cooling. Cooling on a rack allows the cookies to crisp and resist excess moisture retention that might otherwise make them soggy.
11. Once completely cooled, the cookie shapes may be stacked and stored in an airtight container until it's time to decorate.

Almond Cookie Icing

Make about 1-1/2 cups.

(Based on your decorating plan, two batches of icing may be required)

The flavors in this icing mirror and accent the cookies' flavors. It's a simple icing that works well for both piping and flooding on cookies. It has a polished appearance that holds its shine longer than most icings once dry.

Ingredients:

2-1/2 cups confectioners' sugar
2 tablespoons light corn syrup
1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
1/2 teaspoon almond extract
1 - 2 tablespoons whole milk
Green food coloring
White glitter sugar, or white coarse sanding sugar for embellishing

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Directions:

1. Sift the powdered sugar into a mixing bowl to remove any lumps or hard pieces
2. Add the corn syrup, vanilla extract, and 1 tablespoon of the milk. Whisk together by hand to combine. (To minimize air bubbles, mix by hand instead of using a hand mixer or stand mixer for this step).
3. Add additional milk a half-teaspoon at a time until the icing is mixed thoroughly, yet quite stiff.
4. Divide the icing into separate bowls depending how many colors will be used.
5. **Piping Icing:** For colors that will be used to outline the cookies and designs, continue to add drops of milk until the icing is fluid, yet when drizzled on top keeps the imprint for about 7 seconds; this is known as a 7-second ribbon. Outline cookies and designs with a #4 round tip. Check the consistency of the icing; it should flow nicely and be easy to pipe a line; the line should spread just slightly, but more or less keep its shape.
6. **Flooding Icing:** For flooding icing add additional drops of milk until the consistency is more fluid for flooding. A ribbon of icing on the bowl should take 3-4 seconds to disappear into the surface. Flood the outlined areas or cover tightly until ready to use. A toothpick, or the back of a tiny spoon is handy for spreading the icing into corners and reaching all the outlined areas.
7. Repeat the preparation of piping and flooding icings according to the number of colors to be used.

NOTE: Some decorators prefer to keep two bags of each color ready, one for piping and one for flooding – just mix more icing.

8. With piping icing, add “garlands” to the top of the dry, flooded cookies. Add coarse sugars, or food glitter to the wet garlands. Allow the garlands to dry for 15-20 minutes, then shake away any excess sugar or glitter.