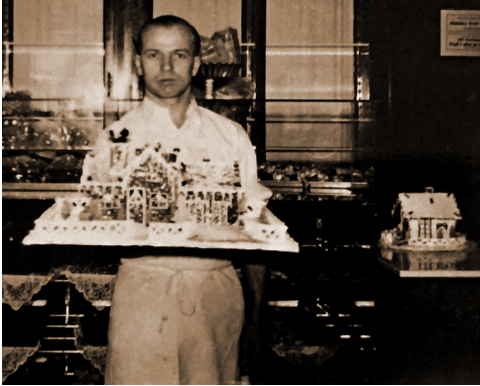


Mark Baum's Gingerbread House / Speculatius Recipe

In 1929, at the age of 17, my father's father -- my Opa -- immigrated to the United States as an indentured servant to pay his boat passage across the Atlantic. The farming people who purchased his indenture took good care of him, taught him English, and even gave him some money when he was done working for them. He was a lucky guy.



Eventually he ended up in Chicago where he peddled eggs on a bicycle during the Great Depression. There he met my Oma, a farm girl from rural Illinois, who was working as a maid on Lakeshore Avenue. They were both members of an old-world Calvinist church which is where they met.

My Opa had apprenticed as a baker in Stuttgart (though there had been almost no ingredients available to bake with at that time), and my Oma decided that they would open a bakery. They moved to Highland Park, Illinois where they were joined by my great-aunts Elizabeth and Dorothy, who helped take care of the children and also worked in the bakery. Over time, Baum's Bakery became a great success.

One photo that mesmerized me as a kid was an elaborate Swiss Chalet made entirely of gingerbread (the picture above shows something different). When we were old enough, my mother helped my sister and me to create gingerbread houses every year. Of course we festooned them with candy because we knew that eventually the houses would be demolished and eaten.

On the right is an early effort from around 1976, as evidenced by the Very 70's Chair in the background. I believe that we used a template published in Sunset Magazine of that year, but you can design your own. Create the template from sturdy cardboard and try assembling the cardboard first to make sure your design makes sense. Then use the cardboard pieces to cut your gingerbread when it's half-baked (see recipe).

The recipe that we used back then has evolved over the years, from a sturdy construction gingerbread to something closer to speculatius, enriched with lots of ground almonds. For me, this cookie represents the holidays more than any other food.



This year, my partner Juan and I made the gingerbread together, and he asked me to write the recipe down so that it could be a little more (ahem) reproducible. I thought I'd share it with you as well. I'll add more details and re-post when we're done baking — so far we've just created the dough.

Happy baking!

Mark

Making the Spice Mixture:

Zest citrus and chop finely. Try using the food processing and 1/2C of your sugar.

Measure citrus peel and all spices into a small saucepan. This recipe uses a lot of spices – you can adjust to taste. Be sure to use a good quality ground ginger (like Frontier).

Add brandy/rum and heat at med-low heat to help blend. Almost bring to a boil.

While heating, juice citrus and strain.

Remove spices from heat and add citrus juice.

Stir until completely smooth, then set aside to cool (or cover and place in refrigerator).

Making the Flour Mixture:

Measure flour into large bowl.

Use a sieve to scatter in baking soda, baking powder, ammonium carbonate, salt (if butter is salted, you can reduce or leave out the salt).

Note that if you can't get (or don't like) ammonium carbonate, you can use baking soda only (see measurements below). The flavor won't be as good, and the cookie won't be as light and crisp. On the plus side, your house won't smell like Windex while you're baking, and you can taste the raw cookie dough.

Stir and sift the flour until ingredients are well-distributed.

Create ground almonds in food processor, adding some more flour (1/2C?) to prevent a paste from forming. Today we ran out of almonds and used finely ground unsweetened coconut for half of our nuts.

Measure ground nuts into the flour and stir until ingredients are well-distributed. Move flour to another bowl.

Making the Butter / Sugar mixture and Dough:

Cream butter and sugar in the large bowl until fluffy.

Check liquid measurement of spice mixture. Top off with more liquor if it's less than the measurement of the original liquor (amazingly, that can actually happen). Add to butter mixture and stir until completely blended.

Add the flour and stir that until completely blended. You may need to lift and turn the dough to get at flour underneath.

Gather together the dough and refrigerate.

Shaping and Baking:

Once dough is chilled, roll out thinly and cut into shapes. I prefer very thin cookies.

I also really like to use cookie stamps. This dough isn't ideal for deep speculatus molds because it does rise significantly due to the ammonium carbonate, but it does OK with cookie stamps. You could try reducing the ammonium carbonate if you want to use molds or if you want fine detail.

If making a gingerbread house, don't roll too thinly so you'll have sturdy pieces. For a gingerbread house, have templates ready of each piece of the house. Partially bake sheets of dough, remove from oven, place your templates on the dough, and cut around them. Then return the dough to the oven to continue baking.

Bake in a preheated 350F oven, probably for 10-15 minutes (I'll confirm this). The cookie should be crisp when cool, but not baked long enough to taste toasted. Get cookies off the pan and onto a cooling rack as soon as they leave the oven. If they aren't crisp when cool, put them back in the oven for a little while.

Spice mixture

Fresh citrus zest	2 T	4 T	6 T	8 T
Cinnamon (or more)	2 T	4 T	6 T	8 T
Ginger (or more)	2 T	4 T	6 T	8 T
Cloves (or less)	1 T	2 T	3 T	4 T
Cardamom	1 T	2 T	3 T	4 T
Finely ground pepper	.5 t	1 t	1.5 t	2 t
Nutmeg (or half mace)	.5 t	1 t	1.5 t	2 t
Allspice	.5 t	1 t	1.5 t	2 t
Almond extract	.25 t	.5 t	1.5 t	2 t
Brandy / Rum	.5 C	1 C	1.5 C	2 C
Citrus Juice / water	.25 C	.5 C	.75 C	1 C

Flour mixture

All-purpose flour	3 C	6 C	9 C	12 C
Baking soda	.5 t	1 t	1.5 t	2 t
Baking powder	.5 t	1 t	1.5 t	2 t
Ammonium Carbonate	2 t	4 t	6 t	8 t
<i>If soda only:</i>	<i>1 T</i>	<i>2 T</i>	<i>3 T</i>	<i>4 T</i>
Ground almonds	2 C	4 C	6 C	8 C
Flour for almonds	.25 C	.5 C	.75 C	1 C

Butter / Sugar mixture

Butter	1 ⅓ C	2 ⅔ C	4 C	5 ⅓ C
Sucanat (or brown sugar)	1.5	3	4.5	6

Variations:

You can add honey for part of the liquid for a softer, chewier cookie. Use kirsch instead of brandy and paint the cookie afterwards with a kirsch/honey mixture.

You can use water (or milk or fruit juice) instead of liquor.

If making a gingerbread house (or are allergic to nuts), leave out the nuts completely and use flour instead. This is more like a classic gingerbread, and will be a stronger building material.

Try adding up to 50% more nuts (without reducing flour) to see what that texture is like.

Consider icing the cookies with royal icing or coating one side with dark chocolate and then piping white chocolate for decorations.

Royal Icing:

Royal icing is an excellent cement for building gingerbread houses (so is chocolate, but it's trickier to work with).

You will want different consistencies of icing for different purposes. A thicker icing works well as cement and for creating details. A thinner icing (achieved by adding a little bit of water) is good for "flooding" the surface of a cookie for a smooth coating.

Whisk egg white(s) until frothy.

Add powdered sugar and beat at low speed until blended.

The increase to medium speed and beat until thick and shiny.

Place icing into covered Tupperware containers to prevent it from drying out.

Pipe the icing using decorating tools (you're on your own here).

Icing Ingredients

Powdered sugar	2 C	4 C	6 C	8 C
Egg whites	2	4	6	8
Lemon juice or vanilla	.5 t	1 t	1.5 t	2 t
Food coloring (if desired)				