

Baking tips for holiday food

Heading to the kitchen, rather than the store, can save time and money, and still yield gifts with a personal touch.

Making, rather than buying, holiday baked goods, can typically save 50 percent—or more—of the cost to buy similar items.

While there is an investment in time, spending a morning or afternoon baking can be enjoyable. And, with a great variety of holiday recipes available, even inexperienced cooks can enjoy success. Here are some holiday baking tips to help you be successful too:

- Choose recipes that sound good to you and include typically well-liked ingredients.
- Read recipe directions to see if the process fits your skills and the time available.
- Check ingredients on hand and “use-by” dates on the products. Discard products past their prime, and buy fresh ingredients for fresh-tasting results.

- Purchase shelf-stable ingredients such as flour, sugar and nuts in bulk to trim costs.
- Check the condition of kitchenware. If cookie sheets or bread pans are not in good condition, consider buying one, new high-quality pan this year and another next year.

- Weigh differences before buying metallic bakeware. A shiny cookie sheet reflects heat and will yield a baked product that is lighter in color; a darker cookie sheet absorbs heat and will bake more quickly. Lowering the baking temperature (25 degrees F) will help to keep cookies and breads baked in darker pans from overbaking. High-quality bakeware isn't necessarily expensive. A traditional 9x13-inch baking pan can be purchased for \$10 or less.

- Before baking, re-read a recipe to make sure all ingredients and equipment are on hand.
- Preheat oven (as directed in a recipe) before baking to achieve standard results. Oven temperatures can vary, but can be checked with a relatively inexpensive (\$5- \$10) oven thermometer. If an oven thermometer registers 375 degrees F when the oven is set at 350 degrees, reduce the setting to 325 degrees F (or lower) and re-check before baking. If lower, boost to match the recommended temperature.



Home Time

By **Tranda Watts**
Multi-county Extension Agent

- Mix cookie dough according to recipe directions; ingredients should be mixed well. Overmixing will toughen cookies.
- Spoon flour into measuring cups and level off for correct measure. Adding too much flour (either to the recipe or when re-rolling cookies or pastry) can toughen dough.
- To simplify cleaning up the cookie sheet, cut parchment paper (sold in a roll in a box with a cutting edge similar to waxed paper or aluminum foil) or nonstick foil to fit baking surface and discard after baking. With bar cookies, cutting parchment paper or nonstick foil slightly larger than the baking surface of a 9x13-inch baking pan simplifies cleanup and also makes it easier to remove baked bars from the pan.

- If making pastry, follow recipe directions. Adding too much flour can toughen pastry. Use ice water, rather than cold tap water. The ice water will help fat retain its shape and make a tender, flaky crust.
- Forming pastry into a flattened ball, wrapping it in waxed paper or food-grade plastic wrap and refrigerating it for 45 to 60 minutes (before rolling) can make it easier to roll. Placing the pastry between two pieces of parchment paper before rolling also can simplify the process.

- Fold rolled pastry over the rolling pin and then unfold it gently (Stretching the pastry will encourage shrinkage) to fit the pan. Pinching, fluting or otherwise the edge of the crust can enhance the appearance of the pie; monitoring the baking process is recommended, as edges can overbrown. Adding a collar made from aluminum foil during baking can prevent overbrowning.

- To test the doneness of a custard pie, insert a clean knife in between the outside edge and center of the filling; if the knife comes out clean, the custard is cooked. The center may jiggle slightly. Cool, cover and refrigerate.

- Fruit pies are typically high in sugar content; follow recipe directions to estimate doneness. Pastry or crumb topping will typically be golden brown.
- What makes a meringue pie weep? Small beads of moisture (which appear to be weeping) from a meringue are caused by granulated sugar that has not dissolved when blended with egg whites. Processing granulated sugar in a blender or food processor to superfine or using superfine sugar may remedy the problem. Add sugar slowly to the egg whites during beating to dissolve all of the sugar.

- What does the percent of chocolate mean? Cacao content includes chocolate liquor, cocoa butter and cocoa powder. Semi-sweet or bittersweet baking chocolate typically is 60 percent cacao content. Using chocolate with a higher percent of cacao can make some baked products dry and bitter. For best results, choose ingredients that are called for in the recipe.

- Wrapping and storing gift foods will protect food quality and flavor. Follow recipe directions for cooling and storing baked products.
- Labeling food gifts is recommended, particularly when nuts and other potential allergens are included in the recipe. Enclosing a copy of the recipe in a holiday card is often appreciated, as some who receive the gift often will ask for a recipe.

- If you have questions regarding food preparation, please feel free to contact your local K-State Research and Extension Office or e-mail twatts@oznet.ksu.edu.

Tranda Watts is Kansas State University extension specialist in food, nutrition, health and safety for Decatur, Gove, Norton, Sheridan and Trego counties. Call her at 785-443-3663 or e-mail twatts@oznet.ksu.edu.

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