

Defending Italian Cookies: Che Buono! (So Good!)



BILL HOGAN/CHICAGO TRIBUNE/MCT

Italy offers a colorful and diverse repertoire of cookies, such as pine nut fig cookies, that have yet to be fully seen in the United States.

BY RENEE ENNA

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Despite our country's romance with all things Italian, it seems there is a serious gap when it comes to Italy's colorful and diverse repertoire of cookies.

Admittedly, it's not as if French, Peruvian or Latvian cookies are flooding the markets here. But at a time when the vast array of Italian olive oils, breads, pastas, cheeses, etc., continues to be celebrated in high-end restaurants and mainstream supermarkets alike, the Italian cookie remains an anomaly.

(Anyone who bakes them knows this. You hand your precious tray of Italian cookies to the recipient, who looks down at these sturdy treasures and says, eyes darting hither and yon, "Wow! I'm going to save these for later!" We all know what later means.)

Besides biscotti — the authentic ones often criticized for approximating the texture of granite or, worse still, Americanized into a variety of bizarre flavors and squishy textures — and perhaps the pizzelle, those crispy wafers that require a special appliance, the Italian cookie carousel remains familiar mostly to Italian-Americans who bake (or whose relatives do), dedicated Italophiles and those who stock their pantry with Stella D'oro.

Most Americans, asked to define cucidati, will furrow their brows and perhaps blush. (It's a fig cookie. And, for the record: koo-chee-DAH-tee.) Ditto for the chubby Italian lemon cookies. Sicilian sesame cookies. Cantucci (crunchy almond cookies). There are more. Hundreds more.

"The range of Italian cookies in Italy are virtually unknown here," agreed Francine Segan, an Italian-American and author of "Dolci: Italy's Sweets" (Stewart, Tabori & Chang). Her book explores many Italian cookies, including amaretti and savoiardi (aka the ladyfingers you enjoy in tiramisu), and she acknowledged that she only skimmed the surface in her beautiful book. Indeed, the variety she found on her travels through Italy, she said, was "a real surprise."

Part of the problem is that these cookies' flavor profiles are often lost on a culture that reaches for a soft-sweet-sugar blitz.

"Americans generally like chewy cookies," Segan said. "To get a soft, chewy cookie, you're going to need a lot of butter. Generally, Italians don't like that much." And, she added, "they do not (use) as much sugar as we do."

Which brings to mind a friend who dislikes Italian cookies just

think that if there were 45 gelati in the case, they would all taste the same."

Luchetti wonders if it's time for American bakers to start bridging the gap between Italian classics and American preferences. The pine nut-fig cookie in her latest book, "The Fearless Baker: 175 Surprisingly Simple and Utterly Indulgent Recipes" (Little, Brown), uses traditional Italian ingredients (pine nuts, figs, semolina) but incorporates melted butter to create a moister, flatter cookie. This is not to dismiss anybody with a penchant for authentic Italian cookies. Luchetti, a proponent, says that Italian cookies have not morphed into a steroid version of something they're not. She recalled sitting next to a woman on an airplane who was unwrapping a cookie whose package said it "serves 4."

"The good thing about Italian cookies, as opposed to American cookies, is that sometimes you just want a small bite of something sweet," Luchetti said. "The tradition of the Italian cookie is in a good spot: It has stayed where the intention was."

ABBONDANZA!

Looking for authentic Italian cookie recipes? The Internet will yield a variety of recipes, and so will your neighbor's nana. (Do not pass up any opportunity to bake with a veteran.) In the meantime, these cookbooks deliver the goods:

"Dolci: Italy's Sweets," by Francine Segan (Stewart, Tabori & Chang).

"Cookies Unlimited" (William Morrow). Nick Malgieri, the renowned cookbook author and teacher, offers many Italian cookies in this book, as well as delicious examples from other cultures.

"La Dolce Vita" (Harper Perennial, out of print but available from online sellers), by Michele Scicolone. An array of cookies as well as myriad desserts from this prolific author of Italian cookbooks.

"Sweet Maria's Italian Cookie Tray" (St. Martin's Griffin), by Maria Brusino Sanchez, is short on photos, long on authentic recipes.

SICILIAN SESAME COOKIES

Prep: 40 minutes Chill: 1 hour
Cook: 30 minutes Makes: 24 cookies

From "Dolci: Italy's Sweets," by Francine Segan. This variation of the Sicilian classic, produces moist, lemony cookies, encased in a crunchy sesame-seed crust, writes Segan, and "is a bullet-proof recipe that produces pastry shop-perfect cookies every time."

2 cups (12 ounces) flour
1/2 cup (3 1/2 ounces) sugar
8 tablespoons butter, olive oil or lard, see note

3 eggs, separated
2 tablespoons milk
1 tablespoon honey
Grated zest of 1/2 lemon
1/4 teaspoon salt
3/4 cup sesame seeds
3 tablespoons water

Combine the flour, sugar and butter in a large bowl until mixture resembles coarse sand. Add the egg yolks, milk, honey, lemon zest and salt; knead with your hands until a dough forms. Roll the dough into a ball; cover with plastic wrap. Refrigerate 1 hour. Heat oven to 350 degrees.

Alicia Schuch is a 2008 graduate of Dell Rapids High School and a graduate of SDSU with BS in Bio Pre-Med/PA and currently works at Sanford Hospital in Sioux Falls, SD.

Daniel Daum is a 2010 graduate of Platte-Geddes High School and attended SDSU and currently works in construction. He will be deployed to Afghanistan in January 2013.

The couple will be wed on November 24, 2013 at Dell Rapids Reformed Church in Dell Rapids, SD.



Daum - Schuch

David and Cindy Schuch, Dell Rapids, SD are proud to announce the engagement of their daughter, Alicia Renee Schuch to Jacob Daniel Daum; son of Daniel and Phyllis Daum, Platte, SD.

40th Anniversary Celebration



Mr. & Mrs. Darrel Heimes

Darrel and Marilyn Heimes will celebrate their 40th wedding anni-

versary on Sunday, November 18, 2012. They were married in Mitchell, SD on November 18, 1972. Their children are Brian (Cody) Heimes of Bismarck, ND; Julie (Matt) Stinson of Box Elder, SD; and Jennifer (Steve) Allen, of Black Hawk, SD. They have 9 grandchildren. Cards may be sent to 3323 Maple Avenue, Rapid City, SD 57701 to congratulate them on 40 wonderful years of marriage.



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Toast the sesame seeds in a dry skillet over medium heat until light golden, about 5 minutes; shake pan occasionally and do not overcook, or they'll burn. Pour into a shallow bowl or plate; let cool.

Beat the egg whites and water with a fork in a small bowl; set aside.

Divide chilled dough into four portions. Roll each section into a log about 1-inch thick; cut the log into 1 1/2-inch sections. Dip each section in the egg whites, then roll in the sesame seeds, covering all sides. Place cookies on baking sheet lined with parchment or foil. Bake until golden, about 30 minutes. (Do not over bake; check the bottom of the cookies.) Cool cookies on wire rack. Cookies can be stored in an airtight container for several weeks, and freeze well too.

Note: Butter or oil will give these cookies a softer center; lard will make them crunchier.

Nutrition information per serving: 139 calories, 7 g fat, 3 g saturated fat, 34 mg cholesterol, 16 g carbohydrates, 3 g protein, 43 mg sodium, 1 g fiber

PINE NUT-FIG COOKIES

Prep: 40 minutes Cook: 12 minutes per batch Makes: About 30 cookies

These cookies could be considered the bridge between Italian and American tastes that pastry chef Emily Luchetti mentions. Traditional Italian ingredients — pine nuts, figs and cornmeal — meld with an American approach (courtesy of the chewy goodness from generous amounts of butter and brown sugar). This recipe is adapted from Luchetti's book, "The Fearless Baker."

1/2 cup pine nuts
1 1/2 sticks (3/4 cup) unsalted butter, melted



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1 1/4 cups firmly packed light brown sugar
1/4 cup granulated sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 large egg plus 1 large egg yolk

2 1/4 cups flour
1/4 cup white cornmeal
1/2 teaspoon each: baking soda, kosher salt
1/2 cup dried figs, cut into 1/4-inch pieces

Heat the oven to 350 degrees. Spread the pine nuts in one layer in a small baking pan; bake until golden brown, 10-12 minutes (check after 10 minutes, being careful not to over bake). Cool; coarsely chop. Set nuts aside.

Pour melted butter in a medium bowl; add the brown sugar, granulated sugar and vanilla, stirring until well combined. Stir in the egg and egg yolk. Add the flour, cornmeal, baking

soda and salt, stirring until combined. Stir in the figs and reserved pine nuts.

Place racks in upper and lower thirds of the oven. Put 2-tablespoon mounds of dough 2 inches apart on parchment-lined baking sheets. (A small ice cream scoop can be useful here.) Bake until the cookies are golden-brown, about 12 minutes, rotating pans midway through baking, if you wish. Let cool to room temperature before serving.

Nutrition information per cookie: 147 calories, 7 g fat, 3 g saturated fat, 25 mg cholesterol, 21 g carbohydrates, 2 g protein, 59 mg sodium, 1 g fiber

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MORNING COFFEE

WEEKDAYS

MONDAY-FRIDAY

Friday, November 16

7:40 am Vermillion Chamber (Steve Howe)

8:20 am United Way (Pam Kettering)