

Chicago Tribune FOOD & DINING



Sfratti cookies

ABEL URIBE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE; SHANNON KINSELLA/FOOD STYLING

Rich in flavor, tradition Savoring desserts especially for Jewish new year

By PEGGY WOLFF
Chicago Tribune

For most of my life I have courted a reputation as an excellent baker. Now, with Rosh Hashana a few days away (the holiday begins at sundown Sept. 9), I get to defend that title by baking a tempting sweets table of yum.

For years, my holiday desserts were an emblem of history, embracing the Ashkenazic Jews who came to the U.S. in large waves, bringing memories or even recipes for the classic apple cake, walnut or almond cake with syrup, apple and nut strudel, and always and forever, the platter of apples with a jar of honey.

But not all Jewish cooking traditions come from Eastern Europe. For centuries, Jewish people lived

and cooked in southern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East — what we think of as the Mediterranean.

So, pure Ashkenazi that I am, the irony is that my heart and my stomach are elsewhere: among the ancient yet enduring Jewish communities of the Mediterranean. Like Italy. And the Syrian, Lebanese and Israeli Jewish communities.

If you have ever visited markets in the eastern Mediterranean region, such as the Jerusalem market, one in Damascus or a Middle Eastern grocery here, you might have seen small decorative wooden molds for making ma'amoul (Arabic for "filled"). Pastries that are shaped with these molds are either filled with dates or some kind of nut-filling. They are very time-intensive, so we have given you a simpler recipe for a date-filled

ma'amoul.

The *duvshanyot*, round iced cookies, were probably brought to Israel, Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi wrote in their cookbook, "Jerusalem," by the Jews arriving in the city from the 1930s from Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Germany. They managed to stamp their mark, opening cafes and bakeries; these cookies are most likely a result of that migration of Jews.

The tradition of baking *sfratti* cookies, which is traditionally prepared at Rosh Hashana, comes from a small southern Italian-Jewish community from the picturesque hilltop town of Pitigliano.

Claudia Fariello, a friend who splits her time between Chicago and Rome, translated this text

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A platter of treats for Rosh Hoshana: date-ribbed Ma'amoul are surrounded by Duvshanyot, round iced cookies.

Cookies rich in flavor, tradition

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from the town of Sorano's municipal website: "This custom goes back to the 17th century when Cosimo II de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, published an edict that ordered the Jews living in

the areas of Pitigliano, Sovana, and Sorano to leave their homes and move into the ghetto in Pitigliano.

A century later, the Jews of Pitigliano created this cookie (*sfratto* means eviction) to remember the event of the messengers

beating on the doors of the Jews (with sticks) and ordering them to leave. In fact, the shape of the *sfratto* is elongated like a stick. The filling of honey, orange peel, walnuts and nutmeg give a sweet flavor and intense aroma." Symbolic foods com-

memorating the struggles of Jews is a recurring theme, yet in this story, the Jews took an unfortunate event and turned it around. It is a mouthwatering treat, a perfect alchemy between crunch and sweetness.

If you're looking toward a very busy holiday season,

when Jewish families are in a constant cycle of celebration and socializing — which means a lot of eating — Jews have never had a better opportunity to breathe new life into that well-known narrative of baking the classic desserts that symbolize the wish for

a sweet new year. Although my desserts this year are cookies — and none of them border on dainty — they will still leave you room for a wedge of your beloved apple cake.

Peggy Wolff is a freelance writer.

Sfratti, honey nut cookies from Italy

Prep: 20 minutes Chill: 2 hours Bake: 20 to 22 minutes

Makes: 48 to 60 pieces depending on how they are cut
This is a traditional Jewish-Italian cookie from Pitigliano, generally prepared at Rosh Hashana but wonderful at any time of the year. Adapted from a recipe by Paula Barbario-Levitt on labellassorella.com.

- 2/3 cup dry white wine
- 1/3 cup olive oil
- 3 cups all-purpose or 00 flour, plus more for rolling pastry
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- Large pinch kosher salt
- Grated zest of 1 lemon
- 1 cup flavorful honey
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground nutmeg
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cloves
- Grated zest of 2 oranges
- 4 cups walnuts, chopped and lightly toasted

1 Combine the wine and olive oil in a pitcher. Place the flour, sugar, salt and lemon zest in a food processor; pulse until mixed thoroughly. With the processor running, pour in the wine and oil mixture; process until a soft dough begins to form, less than 1 minute. Do not over-process.

2 Remove the loosely formed dough to a work surface; knead for a few minutes until the dough comes together and is smooth. Cover in plastic wrap; refrigerate at least 2 hours. Line two heavy-duty baking sheets with parchment paper.

3 For the filling, add the honey, spices and orange zest to a medium saucepan; heat to a boil over medium heat. Watch the pot carefully; the honey could rise up and boil over. Reduce the flame if necessary. Gently boil, stirring to be sure that the spices and orange zest are well combined, about 3 minutes.

4 Add the nuts and stir to be sure that the nuts are evenly coated with the honey mixture. Continue to stir for an additional 5 minutes over medium heat. Remove from the stove; allow to cool, giving the honey-nut filling a good stir every so often, 5 to 10 minutes; you do not want it to cool down too much and solidify.

5 Divide the pastry into 6 equal pieces; form each into a ball. On a lightly floured surface, hand stretch each ball into a small rectangle, about 2 inches by 4 inches. Using a rolling pin, roll the pieces into a 10-inch-by-4-inch rectangle; keep the finished rectangles on the work surface.

6 Heat the oven to 375 degrees. Using a large spoon, place a line of filling down the center of each of the pieces of rolled pastry, dividing the filling equally among the 6 pieces. (You may have filling leftover for another use.) Roll the pastry dough around the filling, turning the "sticks" so the seam is at the bottom. Pinch together the ends of each of the logs; place 3 on each of the baking sheets.

7 Bake until the pastry is light golden, 20 to 25 minutes. Halfway through the baking, rotate the position (front to back) of each baking sheet and switch them between the 2 shelves.

8 Transfer baked sheets to a rack to cool completely. Cut into straight slices or on the diagonal. The pre-cut "sticks" may also be wrapped in foil for a few days, or frozen. Slice when you are ready to serve.

Nutrition information per cookie (for 60 cookies): 115 calories, 6 g fat, 1 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 14 g carbohydrates, 8 g sugar, 2 g protein, 3 mg sodium, 1 g fiber

Duvshanyot, round iced cookies

Prep: 45 minutes

Bake: 13-15 minutes

Makes: about 50 cookies

This recipe is adapted from "Jerusalem" by Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi, who note that the cookies are loosely inspired by a recipe for *pfiffernusse* from Nancy Baggett's "The International Cookie Cookbook." Made with honey and spices, they are made for Rosh Hashana. For the half egg, beat an egg lightly then divide in half. Look for superfine sugar in the baking aisle of the grocery store, or make your own by processing granulated sugar in a food processor until it's fine. (Measure after you process.)

- 3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons dried currants
- 2 tablespoons brandy
- Scant 2 cups flour
- 1 1/2 teaspoons cocoa powder
- 1/2 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/4 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon each, ground: cinnamon, allspice, ginger, nutmeg
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 5 ounces dark chocolate, coarsely grated
- 1/2 cup unsalted butter, at room temperature
- 1/2 cup superfine sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/2 teaspoon grated lemon zest
- 1/2 teaspoon grated orange zest
- 2 large eggs
- 2 tablespoons finely diced candied citrus peel
- Glaze:
 - 3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
 - 1 1/2 cups powdered sugar

1 Soak the currants in the brandy, 10 minutes. Whisk together the flour, cocoa powder, baking powder, baking soda, spices, salt and dark chocolate in a large bowl.

2 Put the butter, sugar, vanilla and lemon and orange zests in a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment; beat to combine but not aerate much, about 1 minute. With the mixer running, slowly add the egg; mix, about 1 minute. Add the dry ingredients, followed by the currants and brandy. Mix until everything comes together. (Alternatively, mix with an electric beater or by hand.)

3 Gently knead the dough in the bowl with your hands until it comes together and is uniform. Pinch off 1/2-ounce chunks (about 1 1/2 teaspoons); shape each into a perfectly round ball (about 1 1/2 inches in diameter). On two baking sheets lined with parchment paper, place the balls about 1/2 inch apart.

4 Heat the oven to 375 degrees. Bake the cookies until the tops firm up but the center is still slightly soft, 13-15 minutes. Remove from the oven; allow to cool for only 5 minutes. Transfer cookies to a cooling rack.

5 While the cookies are still warm, whisk together the glaze ingredients until a thin and smooth icing forms. Pour glaze over cookies, leaving it drip and coat the cookie with a thin, almost transparent film.

6 Candied orange peel on sprinkle a few pieces of diced candied orange peel on each cookie. Leave to set and serve; or store in an airtight container for up to 2 days.

Nutrition information per cookie: 77 calories, 3 g fat, 2 g saturated fat, 7 mg cholesterol, 11 g carbohydrates, 7 g sugar, 1 g protein, 25 mg sodium, 1 g fiber

Ma'amoul

Prep: 20 minutes

Chill: 20 minutes

Bake: 11 to 14 minutes

Makes: about 40 cookies

In "Saha: A Chef's Journey Through Lebanon and Syria," authors Greg and Lucy Malou offer a method of preparing ma'amoul without a mold. It is easier, and, when the logs are cut, the ribbons of date filling look beautiful.

- Filling:
 - 3/4 cup Medjool dates
 - 2 tablespoons water
 - 1 tablespoon superfine sugar
 - 1 tablespoon Kahlua coffee liqueur
- Cookie dough:
 - 3 1/2 cups flour
 - 1 1/2 cups unsalted butter
 - 1/2 cup powdered sugar, plus more for dusting
 - 1/3 cup milk
 - 3 tablespoons olive oil
 - 1 egg white, beaten

1 For the filling, blanch the dates in boiling water; then quickly immerse them in cold water to loosen their skins; peel and pit the dates. Put them in a saucepan with the water and sugar; heat to a simmer. Cook over a low heat, stirring continuously, until the dates soften to a smooth sticky mass. Remove from the heat; allow to cool. Add the Kahlua. Using hand-held electric beaters, mix to a smooth paste.

2 For the cookie dough, sift the flour into a large mixing bowl. Add the butter; rub it in with your fingers until the mixture is the consistency of fine crumbs. (You also can use a stand mixer with a blade, on medium.) Add the 1/2 cup powdered sugar; mix well. Make a well in the center of the dough, add the milk and oil, working them in with your hands until you have a smooth dough.

3 Dust the work surface with flour. Divide the dough into 3 portions; roll each one out to a 9-by-12-inch rectangle, about 1/4 inch thick. Divide the filling into thirds and smear one portion onto each rectangle of dough, leaving a clear 1/4-inch margin lengthwise along one of the long sides.

4 Brush each clear edge with a little egg white; starting at the opposite edge, roll each rectangle up to form a long log, sealing well at the edge. Transfer to parchment paper. Refrigerate until firm, 20 minutes.

5 Heat the oven to 325 degrees. Remove the chilled cookie logs from the fridge; make slices on the diagonal about 1/4-inch thick. (Keep a glass of ice water at hand to clean the knife as needed.) Arrange pieces on greased baking sheets.

6 Bake, 10 minutes. Lower oven temperature to 275 degrees; bake until the tops feel firm, 19-21 minutes. The cookies should not color, but should remain pale and delicate. Remove from oven; cool on wire racks. When cool, dust liberally with powdered sugar (optional).

Nutrition information per cookie: 122 calories, 7 g fat, 4 g saturated fat, 16 mg cholesterol, 13 g carbohydrates, 4 g sugar, 1 g protein, 3 mg sodium, 1 g fiber