

German Holiday Cookie Classic: Pfeffernuesse – Peppernuts

by Nikki Phelps

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Introduction: Looking to add some old-world charm to your cookie box this season? With their origin in the 17th century, Pfeffernuesse are a true classic of German holiday baking. Recipe and appearance of this cookie varies throughout the Germanic language region but there's one thing they have in common: Their warm and spicy flavor. In medieval times, pepper was the universal term for exotic spices and that's how these delightful walnut size bites got their name. Apart from their manageable proportion and attractive shape, Pfeffernuesse have all the ingredients of a season favorite: A soft dough full of aromatic spices that superbly pair with the earthy flavors of molasses and cocoa. Peppernuts store well, and as any gingerbread cookie, even improve in flavor over time. Dip them in a tangy lemon icing, either in classic white or other colors of your choosing, and decorate with pearl sprinkles, crushed pink peppercorns, or anything else you can come up with to your heart's delight. A quick and truly hands-on bake, these cookies are also a great holiday treat to make with kids.

Recipe

Makes about 40 cookies

A true classic of old-world holiday baking, these cookies have all the ingredients of a season favorite: A soft dough full of warm, exotic spices that superbly pair with the earthy flavors of molasses and cocoa, and the tanginess of the lemon icing. They store well, and as any gingerbread cookie, even improve in flavor over time. Swap out a portion of the AP flour with other types of flour like spelt or rye, or use honey instead of molasses.

Note on ingredients:

Use pumpkin spice or Chinese spice mix instead of the spices listed or skip the freshly ground pepper if you are not a fan. Swap out a portion of the AP flour with other types of flour like spelt or rye, use honey instead of molasses. Almonds may be exchanged for ground walnuts, ground hazelnuts or even ground pecans.

Make ahead:

The final dough can be frozen. Proceed to the step in the recipe when the dough is shaped into two logs and wrapped in plastic. Place both of the logs in a freezer bag and keep frozen for up to two months. Defrost together or individually at room temperature or in the fridge until pliable and proceed with baking as described in the recipe.

Storage:

Pfeffernuesse can be stored in an airtight container or cookie tin in a dark and cool spot (not the fridge) for up to two weeks. The cookies will change from crisp to a more cake like consistency. The baked cookies do not freeze well.

Active time: 45 minutes

Total time: 1.15 hours (including refrigeration)

From culinary instructor Nikki Phelps.

Ingredients:**For the dough:**

80 g butter
80 g light brown sugar
100 grams molasses / honey / agave sirup
2 eggs, at room temperature, lightly beaten
350 grams AP flour
2 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder
50 g ground almonds/walnuts/hazelnuts
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
a pinch of salt
½ teaspoon ground anise seed or star anise powder
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
½ teaspoon ground cloves
½ teaspoon ground ginger
½ teaspoon ground nutmeg
½ teaspoon ground black pepper

For the icing:

about 130 grams powdered / confectioner's sugar
juice of 1 – 2 lemons / lemon juice from a bottle
food coloring / sprinkles / non-pareils / crushed red peppercorns other décor of choice

Tools:

digital scale
sauce pan and wooden spoon
mixing bowl
plastic wrap
parchment paper
large baking sheet
pastry brush

Directions:

- In a small saucepan, melt the butter with the sugar and the molasses at medium heat. Stir ingredients until the sugar dissolves. Take off the heat and let the mixture cool down until warm to the touch
- In a mixing bowl, combine all of the dry ingredients.
- Once the butter-sugar-molasses mix has cooled down, add to the dry ingredients. Using a wooden spoon, mix until crumbly.
- Add both eggs.
- With your hands, knead all ingredients together into a soft dough until no dry spots remain. Keep kneading into a shiny, pliable ball.
- Set out two pieces of plastic wrap, each about 8 inches wide.
- Divide dough in half.
- Roll each half into a log, about 1.5 inches in diameter and about ten inches long. Wrap the log in plastic, tucking in the ends of the plastic wrap.
- Chill both logs in the fridge for at least 30 minutes or up to two days.
- Cover a large baking sheet with parchment paper, set a rack in the middle of the oven and preheat to 350 F.
- Take the first log from the fridge, set it on a cutting board and unwrap the dough.
- Cut the log into ½ inch slices. Using both of your hands, roll each slice into a smooth ball about the size of a walnut. As you go, set the balls onto the baking sheet spacing them 1 inch apart. They will not expand much during baking. Repeat with the second log.
- Bake at 350 F for about 15 minutes until the cookies are slightly domed, are lighter in color, but are still soft to the touch. Do not worry if some of them are slightly cracked.
- Take the cookies out of the oven and leave them on the baking sheet for another 10 minutes, then move them onto a cooling rack.
- If your baking sheet isn't large enough to fit all the cookies, bake one log at a time. Leave the second log in the fridge while you prepare the first for baking. Repeat the above with the second log while the first round of cookies is in the oven.
- For the icing, sift the powdered / confectioner's sugar into a medium size bowl. Pour in some of the lemon juice. Using a small whisk or a fork, smooth the mixture out until no lumps remain. Add more lemon juice in case the icing is too stiff. The icing should drip slowly from the whisk or fork.
- Move all the cookies from the cooling rack back onto the two baking sheets.
- Using a pastry brush, cover the top of each cookie entirely with icing. Alternatively, pick up one cookie at a time upside down with a fork and dip into the icing. Set onto the baking sheet and decorate with the sprinkles of your choice. Let the cookies dry on the baking sheet for about 30 minutes.
- Once the frosting has hardened, store the cookies in an airtight container.