

Cookies 101

Whether you're making cookies for a crowd or brownies for a bake sale, here are a few tips that will help you turn out perfect baked goods every time.

1. Preheat the oven: It takes at least 15 minutes for a standard oven to reach the desired temperature. Many baked goods rely on an immediate blast of high heat in order to rise and develop the proper exterior. Use an oven thermometer to make sure you are baking at the correct temperature.

2. Prepare your pans: It's worth the extra time it takes to prepare your pans and baking sheets properly. Otherwise you will be left with brownies that won't come out of the pan or cookies that stick and break when you try to remove them. Parchment paper and foil come in handy. Follow the specific pan preparation outlined in each recipe.

3. Choose the correct measuring cups: Using the wrong type of measuring cup will result in inaccurate measures and failed recipes. Liquids must be measured in liquid measures (glass or plastic cups with pour spouts and handles) and dry ingredients must be measured in dry measures (handled cups with straight edges so ingredients can be leveled off). See page 8 for more information on proper measuring.

4. Use the right equipment: Make sure you are using the right size pans and baking sheets. It matters. If you don't, you could end up with thin, brittle brownies or bar cookies. If you use small baking sheets, you will only be able to bake a few cookies at a time. Or worse, you will be forced to cram the cookies too close together so that they run into one another as they bake.

5. Use butter softened to the proper temperature: If the recipe calls for softened butter (as most of the recipes do), use softened butter. Still-chilled or cold butter can result in flat, drab-looking cookies, because not enough air will be whipped into the butter when it is creamed with the sugar. See page 527 for more information on softened butter.

6. Scrape down the mixing bowl and beaters: Use a rubber spatula to periodically scrape down the sides of the mixing bowl and beaters to be sure that all of the ingredients are evenly incorporated.

7. Portion and space the dough properly: If you want your cookies to be attractive and uniformly shaped, then measure out the dough carefully. Some cookies spread dramatically during cooking. Follow our spacing suggestions to prevent cookies from fusing into each other while baking.

8. Don't put cookie dough on hot baking sheets: While it is tempting to start putting cookie dough on a baking sheet you've just removed from the oven, this is ill advised because the cookies will begin to spread and flatten before they even reach the oven. Cool down warm baking sheets quickly by running them under cold water.

9. Rotate your baking sheets: Most of our cookie recipes direct you to switch your cookie sheets from top to bottom and rotate front to back halfway through the baking time. This will help ensure that your cookies are evenly baked.

10. Test carefully for doneness: Make sure to remove bar cookies, especially brownies, from the oven when a few moist crumbs still cling to the wooden skewer. Don't expect the skewer to emerge perfectly clean from bar cookies; if it does, the bar cookies are already overbaked. Remember that baking times are guidelines. You need to watch for visual clues as well to determine when your cookies are done. Most cookies look barely set when, in fact, they are ready to come out of the oven.

11. Cool your cookies and bars correctly: Follow the directions given in the recipes for cooling cookies and bars. Let cookies cool on the baking sheet for 10 minutes to firm up, then transfer them to a wire rack to cool completely. Brownies and bar cookies need sufficient cooling time to develop flavor, firm up, and make portioning easier.