



How To Bake And Decorate Cookies.

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Here is my technique, step-by-step, from raw dough to drying. It was developed simply from trial and error. Where applicable, I've photographed the procedure to give you a clearer idea.

CUTTING & BAKING

I prefer to make my cookie dough fresh for each order. Less storage in my freezer and they are soft and ready for rolling. I really like the recipes you will find at cookie cutter websites. They tend to be less butter/more flour ratios that are great when you don't want a cookie that spreads or crumbles, which is crucial for decorating cookies.

Cookie doughs tend to get drier and tougher the more you roll it out with flour, so I avoid that completely by only rolling my dough out onto baking mats (Silpat). Don't use parchment or wax paper, as they crease easily and stick to the dough. The goal here is a flat cookie of uniform thickness. Baking mats stick to your counter surface well, allowing you to roll out the dough easily. They don't require any flour, so you can re-roll scraps over and over without waste.



1. As you work, cover your extra dough with plastic wrap to avoid it drying out. Start with a rectangular piece of dough. Using firm, even strokes, roll your dough out to a minimum 1/4" thickness. Very delicate/complex shapes are less likely to break if you make them a bit thicker, say 1/3" or so. Remember, the cookies will rise, so don't go much thicker or your baking time will need to be longer. There are no big secrets to rolling dough evenly. Use whatever method works best for you. There are a few products out there to help, like rolling pin rings and wooden slats to roll your pin across evenly. You need an even dough to create a smooth icing surface on flat cookies.



2. Cut your cookie shapes from the dough, maximizing the number you can get per roll. Carefully slide the entire baking mat onto your flat cookie sheet and place in your freezer. I prefer to use the 12" x 16" shiny metal cookie sheets with sides, as opposed to the insulated varieties, as I'm more familiar with them and I can use them for baking slab cake layers too. After chilling for 15 minutes in the freezer, the cookies are easy to pick up with your hands. This is a CRUCIAL step, as it allows you to maneuver the firm cookies, remove any scraps AND you'll find that the cookies bake even more evenly when chilled.



3. Have a second baking sheet and mat ready to go on your workspace. Remove tray from freezer and slide one hand underneath the baking mat to pop the cookies out one by one onto the 2nd tray. Leave at least 1.5" between cookies.



4. Immediately bake the cookies according to your recipe in the top portion of your oven, so the bottoms don't brown too quickly. Turn the tray around halfway through the baking time to allow for even colouring. Most of the recipes I use are perfect at 325 degrees F for 20-22 minutes. The smaller the cookie, the shorter the time. For thicker or larger cookies, lower the oven to 300 degrees and bake a few minutes longer. Remember, cookies will firm up as they cool from the oven, so don't overbake.

Do not risk breaking the tender cookies after removing from the oven. Keep them on the trays until they are completely cool to the touch, about 20 minutes or so. **Now get ready to decorate!**

MAKING ICING & DECORATING COOKIES



1. I use a hardening royal icing for decorating all my cookies, as they are often to be packaged or stacked for travel. I find this recipe is less prone to chip and damage. It also adds strength to the overall cookie...and best of all, it tastes delicious! The recipe is as follows:

5 Tablespoons of meringue powder
6 ounces (3/4 cup) of warm water
1 teaspoon of cream of tartar
1 kilogram (2 lbs 4 ounces) of icing sugar (also known as "powdered sugar")

(Do note that even a drop of oil or grease will affect this icing, sometimes causing it not to set hard...so clean all your tools beforehand.)

In mixer bowl, pour in the warm water and meringue powder. Using a hand whisk only, mix 30 seconds until frothy. Add the cream of tartar and mix for 10 more seconds. Add all the icing sugar at once and put the bowl on the mixer with the paddle attachment. At the slowest speed, mix for 10 minutes until the icing is stiff, thick and creamy.



2. This is your stiff icing consistency, which is perfect for assembling gingerbread houses, outlining cookies and making royal icing flowers. To protect it from crusting, always cover the bowl with a semi-damp cloth, (i.e. wet the cloth and then wring it out as much as possible. Do not let it touch the icing directly.)

For larger jobs, use a 10" or 12" minimum size of piping bag, so you don't have to keep refilling it.



3. For easy filling, slip the bag's end over a drinking glass and fill with icing.



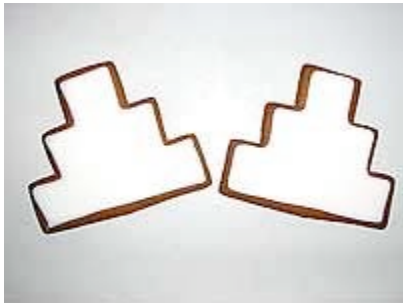
Tie the end of your bag securely with an elastic bag or hair elastic, so that you can use it without any icing oozing out.

Keep a damp cloth on your workstation to clean dried icing from the tip occasionally.



For beginners, take this icing in your piping bag with a #3 or #4 round tip and do the outlines of your cookies at this time.

Stay within 1/4" from the edges of your cookies. Allow to dry for 10 minutes. This stiff outline will hold in your wetter thinned icing when you flood the cookie's surface. Don't leave the outline unfilled for longer than 15 minutes or so, as cracks tend to appear as it dries. Now thin your icing (see next paragraph below) and continue with a clean piping bag



******HINT**

For advance decorators, I prefer the look of a cookie iced WITHOUT the outline technique.

The cookie on the left was outlined and filled. The cookie on the right was filled in a single step with the exact same consistency of thinned icing. Do not outline with the stiff icing, go directly to the thinned icing consistency as described below. It saves hours of work on large batches and often looks cleaner and more professional.



To thin your royal icing, , add 1 tablespoon of water at a time. To the large recipe above, I would use between 1/8 cup to 1/4 cup (or about 2 to 3 Tablespoons) of water to thin it. If you use too much water, you can add a sprinkling of icing sugar to thicken it back up.

The consistency you are looking for for flooding (filling in) your cookies with icing can be compared to white glue, yogurt or cake batter. It should be runny, but not thin or watery. Icing that contains too much water can appear translucent, take much longer to dry...and even worse, darker/bright colours may separate and appear "crystallized" after drying.

Dip a soup spoon into your icing bowl and watch it drip back into your bowl. The drizzle should disappear into the icing within 3 to 5 seconds. If you shake the bowl from side to side quickly, all visible lines should disappear immediately and the top will be smooth and uniform.

******HINT**

You may notice that your icing has lots of tiny air

bubbles in it. For this reason, I like to make my icing a day ahead of decorating...to allow all those bubbles to rise to the surface. If that isn't possible for you, let your thinned icing rest at least an hour, covered with a damp cloth. When you return to it, you will see that the surface is covered in bubbles. Using a spatula, carefully mix the icing for a few seconds by hand and many of these bubbles will disappear.

After thinning the icing, I like to do my colouring. To tint your icing, you have many options. I prefer gels and pastes because they come in such a wide variety of shades and they are nice and bright without having to use a lot. Liquid food colouring is fine for pastels, but it does thin out your icing a bit and it isn't sold in as many colours. I find powdered colours are best left for candy and chocolate making techniques. If you are for a dark or bright colour like red, black, navy blue, etc. the Americolor brand seems the best choice I've come across. I've spent literally hours trying to tint icing and fondant these dark colours without much success, but a few drops of the concentrated Americolor does the trick easily.

As they always say, add a single drop of colouring to your icing at a time. A little really goes a long way and it is MUCH easier to go darker than to return to a lighter hue. If mistakes happen, add a bit of your white icing and mix again. For small batches that are too dark, a few drops of Icing Whitener does seem to help a bit. As your icing sits, the shade will darken slightly. If you are trying to achieve a very dark or bright colour, tint and let it sit for an hour or two. You'll be surprised at the deepened colour when you return.



To fill, I prefer a #4 round tip WITH or WITHOUT outlining. Keeping your piping tip at least 1/4" from the edge of the cookie (or right beside the outline), circle the entire outline of the cookie and fill the inside in one smooth and even tracing movement, like a spiral ending at the centre. Put your bag down and grasp the cookie at the widest part.

Shake the cookie softly from side to side for 3 to 5 seconds, not lifting it from your work surface. (Gently and quickly...kind of like scratching a lottery ticket!) The icing will settle and smooth out. It should be thick

enough that it does not risk dripping over the sides. If it does, you are shaking it too roughly OR your icing may be too thin. Add a sprinkling of icing sugar to your batch and try again.



Put your piping bag down. Take a pin and immediately ease the icing into any missed corners. Wait a few seconds for any remaining air bubbles to rise to the surface and prick them with the pin.

Voila! A perfectly iced smooth cookie. Carefully lift the cookie without tilting it and place it on a rack or tray to harden for 12 - 18 hours before continuing. A flooded cookie will dry from the outer edges inwards, so it's good to have at least one extra cookie in your batch so that you can "test" the stiffness of your icing after a day. As it dries, you'll notice that the outer edges lose their glossiness and are slightly paler than the middle of the cookie

The smaller the cookie, the faster the surface will dry. A 4" cookie dries nice and hard in 18 hours. You don't want to add decoration on top, especially anything coloured, until the base is dry to the touch...or you can risk denting the background and bleeding the 2 colours together.



After the icing is dry to the touch, finish decorating with scrollwork, dots, writing, etc. I prefer a #2 round tip for detailing and writing, using the thinned consistency of icing.

The possibilities for designs are endless. You can use superfine sugars to detail areas, attach gumpaste flowers for a 3-D effect and even paint on edible powders with a bit of extract or alcohol. Here, I've finished the Wedding Cake cookie with the names of the bride and groom, piped a little border in stiff icing along the base and decorated with 3 tiny dried gumpaste flower cutouts.

Any leftover icing is best stored at room temperature. If you aren't using it right away, you can pour it into sandwich bags and remove all the air before sealing. Or, place in an airtight container, pat plastic wrap or parchment paper directly onto the icing and attach the lid. I have kept it up to 30 days without worry. It will separate and thin slightly during storage, and

will require a touch of icing sugar and a few minutes of re-mixing before using again.

Let the decorated cookies dry for a full 24 hours (from the time you finished the background flooding) or an extra 12 hours after additional decorating, before you package or stack the cookies to travel. (I don't recommend stacking these cookies, as the bottoms of cookies often scratch the icing below during transportation.)

Keep your cookies out of direct sunlight and in a cool room for storage. They do not like humidity at all, as the cookie will become softer and moist. I do not freeze my cookies, but I hear that some people are successful at it. They keep nicely wrapped individually for 1 week...10 days at the most before butter starts to get a rancid taste/odour.