

OLD RECIPES

Hamilton County, Kansas

Written by Ruth Ausbun

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We all can remember the cookies and candies that our grandmother and our great-grandmother baked. They were never lacking in taste and had a tang that was as stimulating as the feel of hot mulled cider on your tongue. They had a deep mellow frosting and generous dabs of bright jelly shining in the center. They were an excellent cookie to serve during the Christmas holidays.

Grandmother had nuts, raisins, dates, candied cranberries, pieces of chocolate, coconut, spices, and jars of colored sugar all filled the pantry shelves until they nearly toppled over.

Her soft molasses cookies were never rolled and cut but dropped in irregular heaps on a greased pan and then sprinkled with sugar just before she slid them into the warm black cave of the oven. "Slow and easy does it on them," said Grandma. "If you try to bake them in a more than moderate oven, they will burn on you and taste bitter". She creamed a cup of half butter and half home-rendered lard with a cup of light brown sugar. When it was smooth on the tongue, she added a couple of eggs, "brown ones taste richer", she said, and a cup of dark molasses, and three-quarters of a cup of hot water. Then she added a teaspoon of cinnamon, a half teaspoon of ginger, and a teaspoon of soda. At this point, she stirred the mixture as though the bloodhounds were after her. Her recipe never called for nutmeg, but she gave a couple of grates of that anyway just before she mixed in the flour, which amounted to about 4 cups total.

It was the aromatic and pungent fragrance of her cardamom wafers that most often filled the old ginger jar on her tea table. She would start with a cup of her best butter that was creamed with a cup of sugar. Then two eggs beaten to a golden foam texture, the grated rind of a lemon, 3-4 cups of flour, and an ounce of cardamom seed crushed fine, were mixed together. They were rolled thin, cut with a small wavy edge known as a "crimpy edge", and baked until a delicate brown color. The older they were the better they seemed to taste and, with a cup of freshly brewed tea, a soothing sensation of well-being came over you.

Perhaps it was because Grandmother had the wandering, adventurous, and loving nature in her blood that she so often chose flavorings and spices that were foreign and different. She liked to make caraway cookies and oh how we enjoyed eating them. Half a cup of butter and a third cup of sugar were mixed and beaten with an egg until not a grain of sugar showed. Then seven-eighths of a cup of flour, about a half teaspoon of vanilla, and three-quarters of a tablespoon of caraway seeds were stirred in. She

dropped them on a greased pan in very small dabs, smoothed them over, and pressed them thinly with a knife that had been dipped in cold water. Three Sultana raisins trimmed each one, and then they were baked at 350 degrees and taken from the pan while still hot.

Whenever she got upset and felt like working off some steam she would start in on a batch of anise cookies. They took so much beating that, by the time they were done, she was quite calm and collected again. She said her grandfather told her that, in China, they had an anise seed that was shaped like a star and was sometimes as big across as an inch. He said they put it in tea.

Grandmother would beat 4 eggs until the bubbles were fine and a pale straw color. Then 2 cups of sugar was added and beat again until she had to stop for a breathing spell. Next, she added a teaspoon of baking powder, 3 cups of flour, and a tablespoon of anise seed, pounded fine. They were dropped on a flat baking pan, by the teaspoon, about an inch apart. Then the pan was put away overnight in the lower cupboard shelves out in the entry where it was cool. In the morning they were baked at 375 degrees and then thinly iced with confectioners sugar and lemon juice stirred together and flavored with a grating of lemon rind.

What she called her "fruitcake cookies" were always baked early because they were better after a week or two of storing in the covered crock. A cup of half butter and half chicken fat (if she had it, and other shortening if she didn't) was creamed with a cup of dark brown sugar. Then two eggs, 3 teaspoons of mixed spices, and a quarter teaspoon of salt were stirred in. Next came two cups of flour with 2 teaspoons of baking powder. Last of all, a half cup of coarsely chopped nuts, and a half cup of currants, raisins, and dates, with a few finely cut figs for good measure. They were dropped in small mounds and topped with a sliver of lemon rind and a whole candied cranberry. Some used half of a candied cherry's which were more available at stores. She made her own candied cranberries and kept them on hand for decorating. The baking of these was pretty slow at 325 degrees so they wouldn't burn.

What we always call brownies, grandmother called fudge cakes and I guess she was correct in calling them that. She frosted them with white icing made with confectioners-sugar and cream and flavored with a few drops of peppermint. Two squares of chocolate were melted in the top of a double boiler. Then a quarter of a cup of butter was added and stirred until it melted. A half teaspoon of salt, a beaten egg, a half cup of flour, a cup of sugar, and a half cup of coarsely broken nut meats were added when this had partly cooled. She stirred the mixture until it was smooth and even. She spread it in a square greased pan and baked it in a moderate oven for about 20 minutes. While they were still warm, she cut them into thin narrow strips instead of the usual squares. She believed they were daintier this way.

It was on her sugar cookies that Grandma let loose with the creative urge. The recipe was a normal recipe, I suppose, but she cut them in so many shapes and trimmed

them in so many different ways, that her cookies always stood out from the others. She used a half cup of butter and a cup of sugar, 2 well-beaten eggs, 3 cups of flour, 2 teaspoons of baking powder, a third cup of milk, a half of a teaspoon of lemon and vanilla mixed, and a shake of salt. “Take your time in mixing them, warned Grandma, “and then set them away for overnight in a really cold place. Roll only a few at a time and don’t use too much flour on your board, or they’ll be as tough and dry as a piece of hickory.”

The tops were sprinkled with a brushing of egg yolk, and water before the top-dressing of sugar and cinnamon went on. There was also a raisin, half a date, and a dab of jelly in the center. There were stars, circles, crescents, animals... there was no end.