

RECIPE  
**Sugar Cookies**  
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# MEMORIES by the DOZEN

BIRMINGHAM CHEF ROB MCDANIEL BELIEVES THE SWEETEST GIFTS  
HAVE ALWAYS COME TUCKED IN A COOKIE TIN



BY ROB MCDANIEL, AS TOLD TO BETSY CRIBB PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTONIS ACHILLEOS  
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**MY FAMILY WOULD USUALLY** go to my grandmother Helen's house to celebrate Thanksgiving, and that's when the cookies started to make an appearance. We'd typically have some sugar cookies that day, but Nanny would have already started making other kinds of baked goods in preparation for Christmas. She had a little credenza by the front door, and that, for whatever reason, was where she kept all of them. I remember there being 10 to 15 decorative tins filled with different treats hidden in that spot. She would bake everything from apricot thumbprints with pecans (my favorite) to millionaire candies, cheese straws, and chocolate turtles—just a huge array of stuff.



**Baked with Love**  
Rob McDaniel's grandmother Helen (above center) started their cookie tradition.

We ate those cookies almost every time my family got together in December. Whether my grandparents came to our house or everyone went to my sister's, we always had plenty of sweets. They may have been condensed into two or three tins for easier transport, but they usually traveled with us.

At my own home when I was growing up, my mom—like her mother, Helen—baked cookies and stored them in tins. We kept ours in an antique icebox. I specifically recall my mom asking me what kind I wanted to make one year, and I said the peppermint wreaths that were on the cover of the 1985 December issue of *Southern Living*. I vividly remember making a variety of treats that day—sitting around the kitchen table playing with balls of red and green dough to form the

wreaths, rolling out the butterfingers, and licking sugar cookie frosting from the mixer beaters.

Baking with my mom, the Sears Wish Book showing up, the crocheted angel topping Nanny's tree—those were all signs that the holidays were coming. I think, as you get older, you get caught up in all the ins and outs, like making sure the gifts are bought. It's easy to get lost in that and forget the meaning of the season. But to me, the cookie tins always make me have that feeling, that sense of the Christmas spirit. They're so welcoming and comforting.

Last year, we started making cookies at home with our young daughters and my mom. I love the fact that they're baking with her just like I used to. I don't know if they'll remember it, but it means the world that we can continue the tradition.

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## Sugar Cookies

ACTIVE 45 MIN. - TOTAL 1 HOUR,  
PLUS 2 HOURS CHILLING AND  
3 HOURS STANDING

**MAKES ABOUT 32 COOKIES**

- 1½ cups powdered sugar
  - 1 cup unsalted butter, softened
  - 1 large egg
  - 1 tsp. vanilla extract
  - ½ tsp. almond extract
  - 2½ cups all-purpose flour, plus more for work surface
  - 1 tsp. baking soda
  - 1 tsp. cream of tartar
  - ½ tsp. kosher salt
- Glaze (recipe follows)**  
**Icing (recipe follows)**

1. Beat sugar and butter in a large bowl with an electric mixer on medium-high speed until light and fluffy, 3 to 4 minutes. Add egg, vanilla extract, and almond extract, beating until combined, about 1 minute. Whisk together flour, baking soda, cream of tartar, and salt in a medium bowl. With mixer running on low speed, gradually add flour mixture to butter mixture, beating just until combined, about 1 minute, stopping to scrape down sides of bowl as needed. Divide dough in half; wrap each half in plastic wrap. Chill at least 2 hours or up to 24 hours.

2. Preheat oven to 375°F with racks in top and bottom positions. Line 2 large baking sheets with parchment paper.

3. Roll out each half of cold dough to ¼-inch thickness on a lightly floured work surface. Cut into desired shapes using 2 ½- to 3 ½-inch cookie cutters. Place about 2 inches apart on prepared baking sheets. Reroll dough scraps as needed.

4. Bake in preheated oven in 2 batches until cookies are lightly browned around edges, 7 to 8 minutes per batch, rotating baking sheets between top and bottom racks halfway through baking time. Let cool on baking sheets, about 1 hour.

5. Decorate using Glaze and Icing as desired. Let cookies

stand until completely dry, about 2 hours. Store in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 5 days.

## Glaze

ACTIVE 5 MIN. - TOTAL 5 MIN.

**MAKES ½ CUP**

- 1 cup powdered sugar
- 1 Tbsp. plus 1 tsp. whole milk
- 1 Tbsp. plus 1 tsp. light corn syrup
- Liquid or gel food coloring (assorted colors), optional

Whisk together sugar, milk, and corn syrup in a small bowl until smooth. If desired, divide Glaze evenly into separate bowls, and stir in food coloring. Store in an airtight container in refrigerator for up to 5 days. Before using, bring to room temperature and stir.

## Icing

ACTIVE 5 MIN. - TOTAL 5 MIN.

**MAKES ABOUT 1 ¾ CUPS**

- 1 (16-oz.) pkg. (about 3¾ cups) powdered sugar
- 1 Tbsp. unsalted butter, softened
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 4-6 Tbsp. whole milk, as needed
- Liquid or gel food coloring (assorted colors), optional

Beat sugar, butter, and vanilla in a medium bowl with an electric mixer on high speed, adding milk as needed until mixture is smooth and desired consistency, about 2 minutes. If desired, divide Icing evenly into separate bowls and stir in food coloring. Store in an airtight container in refrigerator for up to 5 days. Before using, bring to room temperature and stir.

## Apricot Thumbprints

ACTIVE 25 MIN. - TOTAL 1 HOUR,  
5 MIN.

**MAKES 20 COOKIES**

- ½ cup vegetable shortening
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- 1 large egg, separated
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1 cup all-purpose flour, sifted

- ½ tsp. kosher salt
- 1 cup chopped pecans
- ⅓ cup apricot preserves

1. Preheat oven to 325°F with racks in top and bottom positions. Line 2 large baking sheets with parchment paper.

2. Beat shortening and sugar in a large bowl with an electric mixer on high speed until light and fluffy, 3 to 4 minutes. Add egg yolk and vanilla, and beat until just combined, about 1 minute. Reduce mixer speed to low; gradually add flour and salt, beating until combined, about 1 minute. Shape dough into 20 (1-tablespoon) balls.

3. Place pecans in a bowl. Whisk egg white in a small bowl until frothy. Dip dough balls in egg white; roll in chopped pecans to coat. Arrange ½ inches apart on prepared baking sheets.

4. Bake in preheated oven 5 minutes. Remove from oven; using a clean thimble or the end of a wooden spoon, make a ½-inch-deep indentation in the center of each ball. Place a heaping ¾ teaspoon preserves in center of each cookie.

5. Bake until lightly browned, 12 to 15 minutes, rotating baking sheets between top and bottom racks halfway through baking time. Let cool on baking sheets 5 minutes. Transfer to wire racks, and let cool completely, about 15 minutes.

## Cherry Winks

ACTIVE 30 MIN. - TOTAL 2 HOURS

**MAKES 3 ½ DOZEN COOKIES**

- ⅓ cup, plus 42 red maraschino cherries (from 2 [16-oz.] jars), divided
- 2½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- ½ tsp. baking soda
- ½ tsp. kosher salt
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- ¼ cup plus 2 Tbsp. vegetable shortening
- 6 Tbsp. unsalted butter, softened
- 2 large eggs
- 2 Tbsp. whole milk

- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1 cup pecans, chopped
- 1 cup dried dates, chopped
- 3½ cups cornflakes cereal, crushed

1. Chop ⅓ cup of the cherries; set aside. Preheat oven to 375°F with racks in top and bottom positions. Line 2 large baking sheets with parchment paper. Sift together flour, baking powder, baking soda, and salt in a medium bowl. Set aside.

2. Beat sugar, shortening, and butter in a large bowl with an electric mixer on medium-high speed until light and fluffy, 3 to 4 minutes. Add eggs, 1 at a time, beating until well combined, about 1 minute. Add milk and vanilla; beat until combined, about 30 seconds. Reduce mixer speed to low. Gradually add flour mixture, beating until just combined, about 1 minute, stopping to scrape down sides of bowl as needed. Stir in pecans, dried dates, and ⅓ cup chopped cherries.

3. Place crushed cornflakes cereal in a bowl, and drop 1 heaping tablespoonful of dough into cereal. Roll until well coated. Shape into a ball. Place on prepared baking sheet. Press 1 cherry into top of ball. Repeat process with remaining dough, cereal, and cherries, arranging balls 2 inches apart on prepared baking sheets.

4. Bake in preheated oven in batches until cookies are light golden around the edges, 10 to 14 minutes per batch, rotating baking sheets between top and bottom racks halfway through baking time. Let cool on baking sheets about 5 minutes. Transfer to wire racks; let cool completely, about 15 minutes. Store in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 4 days.

## Divinity

ACTIVE 25 MIN. - TOTAL 25 MIN.,  
PLUS 1 HOUR STANDING

**MAKES ABOUT 20 CANDIES**

- 2 cups granulated sugar
- ½ cup light corn syrup

- ¼ tsp. kosher salt
- 2 large egg whites
- ⅛ tsp. cream of tartar
- Pecan halves

1. Line 2 large baking sheets with parchment paper. Stir together sugar, corn syrup, ½ cup water, and salt in a 1-quart saucepan; attach a candy thermometer to side of pan. Cook over medium-high, stirring often, until mixture begins to boil. Boil, undisturbed, until thermometer reaches 260°F (hard-ball stage), 7 to 10 minutes. Remove from heat.
2. Beat egg whites and cream of tartar with a stand mixer fitted with a whisk attachment on high speed until stiff peaks form, about 2 minutes. With mixer running on high speed, slowly pour hot sugar mixture into egg white mixture; beat until stiff peaks form and mixture loses its glossy sheen, 7 to 10 minutes.
3. Working quickly, drop mixture by tablespoonfuls onto prepared baking sheets. Garnish with pecans. Let stand at room temperature until dry to the touch, about 1 hour. Store with wax paper or parchment paper between candies in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 1 week.

### Gingersnaps

ACTIVE 20 MIN. - TOTAL 45 MIN.

**MAKES ABOUT 2 DOZEN COOKIES**

- 1 cup packed light brown sugar
- ¾ cup unsalted butter, softened
- 1 large egg
- ¼ cup unsulphured molasses
- 2¼ cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tsp. baking soda
- 1 tsp. ground cinnamon
- 1 tsp. ground ginger
- ½ tsp. ground cloves
- ¼ tsp. kosher salt
- ½ cup sanding sugar

1. Preheat oven to 350°F with racks in top and bottom positions. Line 2 large baking sheets with parchment paper.
2. Beat brown sugar and butter in a large bowl with an electric

mixer on high speed until light and fluffy, 3 to 4 minutes. Add egg, beating until just combined, about 1 minute. Add molasses; beat until combined, about 30 seconds, stopping to scrape down sides of bowl as needed.

3. Stir together flour, baking soda, cinnamon, ginger, cloves, and salt in a medium bowl until combined. With mixer running on low speed, gradually add flour mixture to butter mixture, beating until just combined, about 1 minute.

4. Place sanding sugar in a bowl. Scoop dough into 1½-tablespoon balls, and roll in sanding sugar. Place rolled dough balls 3 inches apart on prepared baking sheets.

5. Bake in preheated oven until cookies are lightly browned around edges, about 10 minutes, rotating baking sheets between top and bottom racks halfway through baking time. Let cool on baking sheets 5 minutes. Transfer cookies to wire racks, and let cool completely, about 10 minutes. Store in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 5 days.

### Melt-Away Peppermint Wreaths

ACTIVE 30 MIN. - TOTAL 1 HOUR, 40 MIN.

**MAKES ABOUT 28 COOKIES**

- 1¼ cups unsalted butter, softened
- ¾ cup powdered sugar, sifted
- 2½ cups all-purpose flour
- ¼ tsp. kosher salt
- ¾ tsp. peppermint extract
- Red and green liquid or gel food coloring

1. Preheat oven to 375°F with racks in top and bottom positions. Line 2 large baking sheets with parchment paper.
2. Beat butter and powdered sugar in a large bowl with an electric mixer on high speed until creamy and smooth, about 2 minutes. Reduce mixer speed to low; gradually add flour and salt, and beat until combined, about 1 minute. Stir



### Cheese Straws

ACTIVE 25 MIN. - TOTAL 1 HOUR, 55 MIN.

**MAKES ABOUT 21 DOZEN**

- |   |                          |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1 lb. sharp Cheddar cheese, shredded (about 4 cups) | 2 cups all-purpose flour |
| ½ cup unsalted butter, softened                     | 1 tsp. kosher salt       |
|   | ½ tsp. paprika           |
|   | ½ tsp. cayenne pepper    |

1. Preheat oven to 350°F with racks in top and bottom positions. Line 2 large baking sheets with parchment paper. Beat cheese and butter in a large bowl with an electric mixer on medium-high speed until mixture is creamy, about 8 minutes. Reduce mixer speed to low. Gradually add flour, salt, paprika, and cayenne; beat until combined, about 1 minute.

2. Place some of the dough in a cookie press fitted with a ⅜-inch-wide star tip. Press out dough onto prepared baking sheets in strips running about the length of each baking sheet. Cut each strip into 2-inch pieces, and arrange ½ inch apart on baking sheets.

3. Bake cheese straws in preheated oven until firm and lightly browned, 10 to 12 minutes, rotating baking sheets between top and bottom racks halfway through baking time. Let cool completely on baking sheets, about 20 minutes.

4. Repeat Steps 2 and 3 in batches with remaining dough. Store cheese straws in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 4 days.

in peppermint extract. Divide dough in half; place in separate bowls. Stir red food coloring into 1 dough half until desired shade is reached; stir green food coloring into remaining dough half until desired shade is reached.

3. Divide and shape dough into ½-teaspoon balls. Alternating colors, arrange 6 balls in a circle on prepared baking sheet, slightly touching. Press balls to flatten slightly so they stick together and form a wreath shape. Repeat process with remaining dough balls to make about 28 wreath cookies total, spacing them about 2 inches apart on prepared baking sheets.

4. Bake in preheated oven in batches until cookie tops look dry, about 8 minutes per batch, rotating baking sheets between top and bottom racks halfway through baking time. Let cool on baking sheets 10 minutes. Transfer cookies to wire racks, and let cool completely, about 15 minutes. Store in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 5 days.

### Millionaire Candies

ACTIVE 25 MIN. - TOTAL 55 MIN.

**MAKES ABOUT 30 CANDIES**

Butter, for greasing pan

- 55 caramel candies (such as Kraft) (from 2 [11-oz.] pkg.)
- 1 Tbsp. whole milk
- 2 cups pecan pieces, toasted

Pinch of kosher salt

- 2 cups milk chocolate melting wafers (such as Ghirardelli) (from 2 [10-oz.] pkg.)

1. Line 2 large baking sheets with parchment paper or wax paper; grease with butter.

2. Fill a medium saucepan with water to a depth of 1 inch, and bring to a simmer over medium. Place a heatproof bowl over pan, making sure water does not touch bottom of bowl. Place caramels and milk in bowl; cook over medium, stirring often, until caramels are melted, about 12 minutes. Remove from heat, and set pan aside. Stir in pecans and salt. Drop caramel mixture by tablespoonfuls onto prepared baking sheets. (You will have about 30 mounds.)

3. Return pan with water to a simmer over medium. Place a second heatproof bowl over pan, making sure water does not touch bottom of bowl. Place milk chocolate in bowl; cook, stirring occasionally, until melted, 3 to 5 minutes. Remove from heat, and spoon melted chocolate evenly over caramel mounds. Chill until chocolate is just set, 10 to 15 minutes. Before serving, let candies come to room temperature, about 20 minutes. Store with wax paper or parchment paper between candy layers in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 2 weeks.

### Pecan Kisses

ACTIVE 10 MIN. - TOTAL 1 HOUR, 25 MIN.

**MAKES ABOUT 16 COOKIES**

- 1 large egg white
- ¾ cup packed light brown sugar
- ½ tsp. vanilla extract
- 2 cups pecans, roughly chopped

1. Preheat oven to 250°F with racks in top and bottom positions. Line 2 large baking sheets with parchment paper.

2. Beat egg white in a large bowl with an electric mixer on high speed until soft peaks form, 1 to 2 minutes. Gradually add sugar and vanilla; beat until smooth, about 2 minutes. Fold in pecans. Drop mixture by 1 ½ tablespoonfuls about 1 inch apart on prepared baking sheets.

3. Bake in preheated oven for 30 minutes, rotating baking sheets between top and bottom racks halfway through baking time. Turn off oven, and leave cookies inside. Let cool about 30 minutes. Remove from oven. Transfer cookies to a wire rack; let cool completely. Store in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 5 days.

### Turtle Cookies

ACTIVE 30 MIN. - TOTAL 1 HOUR, 20 MIN., PLUS 1 HOUR CHILLING AND 2 HOURS STANDING

**MAKES 2 DOZEN COOKIES**

- ½ cup unsalted butter, softened

½ cup packed light brown sugar

- 1 large egg
- 1 large egg, separated
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1½ cups all-purpose flour
- ¼ tsp. baking soda
- ¼ tsp. kosher salt
- 2½ cups pecan halves (about 120)

Turtle Cookie Frosting (recipe follows)

1. Beat softened butter and light brown sugar in a large bowl with an electric mixer on high speed until light and fluffy, about 3 to 4 minutes. Reduce mixer speed to medium-high; add whole egg, egg yolk, and vanilla extract, beating until just combined, about 1 minute. Stir together flour, baking soda, and kosher salt in a medium bowl. With mixer on low speed, gradually add flour mixture to butter mixture, beating until just combined, about 1 minute, stopping to scrape down the sides of the bowl, if necessary. Cover; chill at least 1 hour.

2. Preheat oven to 350°F with racks in top and bottom positions. Line 2 large baking sheets with parchment paper.

3. Arrange pecan halves in groups of 5 on prepared baking sheets, in a star shape to resemble head and legs of a turtle.

4. Shape dough into 24 (1-tablespoon) balls. Whisk egg

## TINS TO TREASURE

McDaniel's grandmother built up her cookie tin collection (pictured at right) over many years. Start your own with finds from sites like Etsy and eBay.



white in a small bowl; dip bottom of each dough ball in egg white. Gently press each ball into a cluster of pecans to resemble a turtle's body.

5. Bake in preheated oven in batches until cookies are lightly browned around edges, 10 to 12 minutes per batch, rotating baking sheets between top and bottom racks halfway through baking time. Carefully transfer cookies to wire racks; let cool completely, about 15 minutes.

6. Spoon frosting evenly over the top of each cookie to resemble a turtle shell. Let stand until completely dry, about 2 hours. Store with wax paper or parchment paper between cookie layers in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 5 days.

#### Turtle Cookie Frosting

ACTIVE 5 MIN. • TOTAL 5 MIN.

**MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP**

- 2 (1-oz.) semisweet chocolate baking squares
- ¼ cup brewed coffee
- 1 Tbsp. unsalted butter
- 1¾ cups powdered sugar, sifted

Place semisweet chocolate squares, coffee, and butter in a small saucepan. Cook over low, stirring constantly, until chocolate is melted, about 2 minutes. Remove from heat. Whisk in powdered sugar until smooth. Use immediately.

#### Butterfingers

ACTIVE 20 MIN. • TOTAL 1 HOUR, 40 MIN.

**MAKES 30 COOKIES**

- 1 cup unsalted butter, softened
- ¼ cup plus 2 Tbsp. powdered sugar, plus more for rolling
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- ¼ tsp. kosher salt
- 2 cups chopped pecans

1. Preheat oven to 250°F with racks in top and bottom positions. Line 2 large baking sheets with parchment paper.

2. Beat butter and sugar in a bowl with an electric mixer on high speed until creamy, about 2 minutes. Reduce mixer speed to low; gradually add flour, vanilla extract, and kosher salt. Beat until just combined, about 2 minutes. Stir in pecans. Shape dough into 30 (1½-tablespoon) logs, each about 2½ to 3 inches long. Arrange 2 inches apart on prepared baking sheets.

3. Bake in preheated oven until bottoms are just browned, about 50 minutes, rotating baking sheets between top and bottom racks halfway through baking time. Let cool slightly on baking sheets, about 10 minutes. Roll warm cookies in additional sugar to coat. Let cool completely on baking sheets, about 20 minutes. Store in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 4 days.



#### Candied Peanuts

ACTIVE 20 MIN. • TOTAL 50 MIN., PLUS 1 HOUR STANDING

**MAKES ABOUT 6 CUPS**

Preheat oven to 300°F. Line a large rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper. Place 2 cups granulated sugar and 1 cup water in a medium saucepan; cook over medium, stirring often, until sugar dissolves, about 2 minutes. Add 4 cups raw blanched peanuts, and cook, stirring often, until liquid evaporates and sugar crystallizes around peanuts, 14 to 16 minutes. Spread in an even layer on prepared baking sheet. Bake, stirring every 10 minutes, until peanuts are roasted and dry, about 30 minutes. Remove from oven, and let cool completely on baking sheet, about 1 hour. Store in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 3 weeks.

