



Christmas Baking

15 things to bake and share this Christmas...



LOCAL
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LOVELY



Christmas Baking & Giving...

Christmas is my jam. It's also when I like to make lots of jam but that's not really the point. The point is - that this is the time of year when baking keen beans like us can really get carried away in the kitchen. It's the time of year to make butter cakes studded with cranberries, then wrap them in paper and tie them with twine to leave at a neighbors door (away from the dogs perhaps) with a nice little Christmas note. It's the time of year to do up a batch of spiced nuts then decant them into nice jars for the teachers and long-suffering legends in the school office who re-print lost newsletters and permission slips for you, put bandages on your kids knees and hold ice cream containers out for them while they're sick and you're on your way in to collect them and keep little schools like ours running so beautifully. Or perhaps that's just me.

It's the time of year to buy big boxes of cherries and get messy making them into bottles of cordial or chutney. It's when there are lots of parties and it's nice to take something homemade to say 'thanks for having me and sorry if I drink a bit too much punch'.

And it's also a time of year that money can be a touch tight - all those presents, all that travel etc etc. So homemade presents are not only so much more meaningful than bought ones, but also a lot more economical. Thrift is not a dirty word people.

So here are a collection of the things I love to bake, make and give at this time of year. I hope you enjoy them and wish you all a very happy, calm and delicious Christmas. Thank you so much for your support this year

Sophie x





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Cakes & Sweet Breads



GRANDMA BOOTH'S CHRISTMAS PUDDING

My friend Anna's Christmas pudding comes from her late Grandmother's recipe collection and I feel very honoured to be able to share it here. It really is very easy – you don't even have to soak the fruit so it can be made even the day before Christmas – and it tastes amazing.

225g butter
225g caster sugar
8 eggs
225g raisins
225g currants
110g mixed peel, chopped
225g Granny Smith apples, grated (unpeeled)
225g soft breadcrumbs
55g plain flour
1/2 cup blanched almonds, chopped
1 tsp mixed spice
1/2 cup brandy

Cream butter and sugar together and add eggs, once at a time, beating well between each addition.

Fold in the dried fruit, peel, apples, flour, almonds, breadcrumbs and mixed spice. Finally, mix in the brandy and spoon into a buttered pudding basin. Cover with a layer of baking paper and secure tightly with string. Finish with a tight layer of foil and place in a large saucepan of boiling water over high heat.

Boil for six hours, topping up the water as you go.

Once cooked, Anna suggests you keep your pudding in its basin, in the fridge until needed. Then just return it to that large saucepan, fill with boiling water and cook for 20 minutes or so, just until heated through.



MELT AND MIX SUMMER FRUIT CAKE

Basically a melt and mix job, you can have this cake in the oven within 15 minutes of deciding to make it and better yet, it's the perfect vehicle for the beautiful summer fruit all around us at the moment. This time I used red currants and apricots (which were, I must admit just a touch too tangy for the kids but not so the rest of us), but it would be just as good with any sliced stone fruit, berries or even, further down the track poached pomme fruit (apples, pears, quinces).

1/2 cup buttermilk
1 egg
1/2 cup caster sugar
1 1/2 cups self raising flour
60g butter, melted
1 tsp vanilla paste
1 tsp lemon zest, finely grated
4 apricots, halved and quartered
1 handful red currants
4 tbspcaster sugar and
1/2 tsp mixed spice

Preheat oven to 180C and grease and line a loaf tin or 20cm springform cake tin.

Mix the buttermilk, egg, sugar, flour, cooled melted butter, vanilla and lemon rind together in a large bowl and stir until well combined. Spoon mixture into the prepared loaf or cake tin and smooth over the top.

Arrange fruit to your liking then combine the caster sugar and mixed spice and dust this over the top. Bake for 30 minutes or until the edges are golden brown and the top firm.

Let cool in the tin for a few minutes before turning out onto a wire rack. Serve with thick natural yogurt or some ice cream.





CHOCOLATE BERRY LOAF

This really is a beautiful cake and it lasts well for up to a week (wrapped etc) so I'd highly recommend doubling the quantities below and making two. Use raspberries, blackberries, red currants or any other berry you fancy here.

1 cup plain flour
5 tbsp cocoa powder
1 tsp baking powder
1/2 tsp bicarb soda
1/4 cup espresso coffee (I used one shot from our little machine at home but you could also make a really strong plunger coffee and use 1/4 cup of that)
1/2 cup natural yogurt
1 tsp vanilla paste
150g unsalted butter, softened
1 cup caster sugar
3 eggs
1 cup blackberries (raspberries or blueberries would also be good).

Preheat oven to 180C and grease and line a large loaf tin.

Sift together the flour, cocoa powder, baking powder, bicarb and a good pinch of salt and set aside.

In another bowl, combine the coffee, yogurt and vanilla and stir well. Now cream the butter and sugar together in an electric mixer, until pale and fluffy. Add the eggs, one at a time, beating well between each addition. Add the yogurt mixture and mix in on low speed. Then, by hand, fold in the flour mixture and finally fold through the blackberries.

Spoon batter into the tin and bake for 45 minutes or until the cake is just pulling away from the tin's sides and it feels firm to touch.



APRICOT BRIOCHE

Rich, golden and bursting with butter, I love working with this dough, love the way it makes my hands feel and smell, love and the gradual process of rising, shaping and pressing into smooth round discs. And of course, I love the end result

You can swap the apricots with pretty much any seasonal fruit, figs would be beautiful here as would berries or sliced peaches. If making these for brunch, just make up the dough the night before then divide up into smaller balls when you wake up, let them rest for a couple of hours and pop in the oven just before your friends arrive and/or you fancy eating them.

4 tbsp full fat milk
2 tbsp active dry yeast
3 1/2 cups 00 baking flour (plain is ok too if that's what you have)
1/4 cup caster sugar, plus extra for sprinkling
1 tsp sea salt
5 eggs, beaten
220g unsalted butter, cubes, very soft
1/2 cup almond flakes.

Warm the milk just a little then place in the bowl of a stand mixer with a dough hook. Sprinkle in the yeast and whisk to combine. Set aside for a few minutes or until frothy. Add the flour, sugar, salt and eggs then mix on low for a few minutes or until the dough comes together.

Increase the speed a little and work the dough for five minutes, stopping every now and then to scrape the dough down from the sides of the bowl. Now, reduce the mixer speed again to low and add the butter a little at a time. Pausing every now and then to scrape any dough down the sides of the bowl. Mix until all the butter is completely integrated into the dough and you have a beautiful smooth mixture. Remove from the mixer bowl and with lightly floured hands, work into a ball.

Transfer to a greased bowl, cover with plastic and place overnight in the fridge.

The next morning, take your dough out of the fridge and gently cut into four or six small balls, depending on how big you want them and how many you want! Gently work the first piece of dough into a smooth dough, pinching the sides down to the base so the sides are all even. Then, using the heel of your palm, flatten the first into a disc (keep the remaining covered with a damp tea towel while you work), with a gentle indentation in the middle. Place on a greased, lined baking tray and repeat with the remaining dough.

Cover loosely with plastic and set aside at room temperature again for two hours. After an hour and a half, preheat the oven to 180C. Slice the apricots into halves or quarters and arrange in the indent of each brioche.

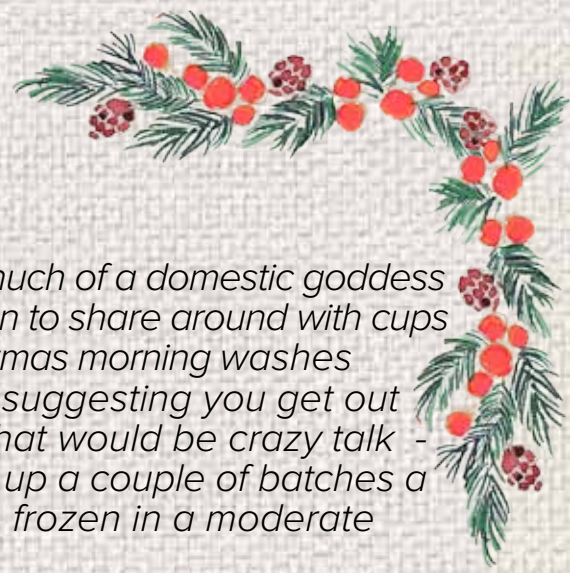
To make the egg wash, combine two tbsp double cream with 1 egg and whisk well. Brush this over your brioche and then sprinkle liberally with the extra sugar and the almond flakes.

Bake in preheated oven for about 20 minutes or until the brioche are golden brown. Serve straight away!





CINNAMON KNOTS



How good would these be on Christmas morning! How much of a domestic goddess or god would you feel pulling these babies out of the oven to share around with cups of tea while presents are opened and the magic of Christmas morning washes over the house. But don't get me wrong, I'm not at all suggesting you get out the rolling pin on the morning of December 25, pffff, that would be crazy talk - these guys don't mind being frozen a little bit so make up a couple of batches a couple of weeks in advance then just cook them from frozen in a moderate oven until warm through (about 40 minutes).

This dough recipe is a wonderful base for all kinds of sweet buns; you can use it to make classic cinnamon scrolls, you can plait it or just use it to make simple sweet buns to serve with jam.

15g dried yeast
2 cups whole milk, lukewarm
1 egg
6 cups plain flour
1/2 cup caster sugar
2 tsp ground cardamom
1 tsp ground cinnamon
1/2 tsp sea salt
150g butter, softened and grated or cut into small cubes

For the filling:

150g butter, softened,
3 tbsp ground cinnamon
3/4 cup caster sugar

For the egg wash:

1 egg
2 tbsp cream
4 tbsp golden caster sugar

For the dough, crumble the yeast into a large bowl (if you are using an electric mixer with a dough hook – which I really recommend – crumble the yeast directly into the bowl for that) and pour over the warm milk. Whisk to combine, then add the egg, flour, sugar, spices, salt and butter. Bring together and knead, either by hand or with your dough hook for five minutes. This is a particularly sticky dough, but should, at the end of this time, be smooth and shiny too.

Transfer to a lightly oiled bowl, cover with a tea towel and set aside in a warm place for one to two hours (dough should double in size in this time).

For the filling, place all ingredients in the bowl of your electric mixer and beat until pale and creamy.

To assemble the knots; roll the pastry out onto a lightly floured work surface so you have a large rectangle, about 30x40cm.

Spread the cinnamon mixture lengthways across the bottom half of the dough, then fold the top half down over the bottom so you have a rectangle about 15x40cm.

Now for the fun part! Cut the mixture down into strips about 2cm thick each, take the first one and wrap it around your four fingers twice, as you would with string if you were tidying up into a loose knot.

Bring the end through the centre of the knot and pull through so you have a round, knot shape. This might take a little bit of practice but if you're not too fussed about aesthetics don't worry – they will still taste amazing and after a good eggwash and spell in the oven, will come out golden and gorgeous anyway.

Arrange knots on a baking tray, with a few cm between each so they have room to increase in size while cooking.

Preheat oven to 180C and set knots aside to rest for a final 30 minutes (to be honest though, at this stage I often leave them for up to a couple of hours and they don't seem to mind, the dough is fairly forgiving).

Before baking, whisk together the egg and cream and brush this gently over the knots, sprinkle with the golden caster sugar and place the tray in your oven to cook for 25 minutes or until the buns are golden.

Your kitchen will smell amazing by the way! Serve with cups of tea and/or hot chocolate.









CRANBERRY & ALMOND FRIANDS

Mum thought these cakes looked a bit like little bosoms. And yes she's right. But I also think they are a pretty little harbinger of the festive season, and can tell you that they taste fantastic. Use any small cake tin/mould you have handy for this recipe – a friand or fancy one is great but a good old muffin tin will do perfectly well too. And of course, any berry would be good here in place of the currants if you prefer. Makes about 12-18 depending on the size of your cake tin.

2/3 cup (110g) natural almonds
1 tsp ground cinnamon
2/3 cup (185g) caster sugar
125g butter, melted
Zest of one orange
1 tbsp natural yogurt
3 egg whites, at room temperature
1 cup cranberries (or any other fresh berries)
1 cup icing sugar, sifted
1 cup cranberries or any other berry you fancy.

Preheat oven to 180C and grease and lightly flour your friand or small cake tin then pop in the freezer. Pop the almonds in the oven for 15 minutes or until toasted and aromatic. Let cool for 10 minutes then tip into the bowl of your food processor, add the cinnamon and sugar and blitz until mixture resembles bread-crumbs. Tip into a large mixing bowl, then add the melted butter, orange zest and yogurt.

Whisk the egg whites until they hold firm peaks (about five minutes) then gently fold half into the almond mixture, keeping as much air in the mixture as possible. Repeat with remaining eggwhites and fold in the cranberries. Divide the batter among your nicely chilled friand, cake or muffin tin, filling each mould up about 2/3 of the way then place in the oven for 20 minutes or until golden and firm to touch.

Let cool in the tin for five minutes then gently turn out onto a wire rack to cool completely. For the glaze, mix the icing sugar with the juice of the orange you zested before, adding it a little at a time until you have a thick glaze. Pour this over the cooled friands and top each, if you like, with an extra cranberry and a little finely chopped almond.

Biscuits



CHRISTMAS SHORTBREADS

Jocie Chapman runs the Old Convent cafe and B&B and is one of the best bakers I've ever met. She makes these pistachio shortbreads every year for Christmas presents and after being sent home with a bag ourselves, I think I might start doing the same. Makes about 30.

250 butter
1 cup lightly packed sugar
1 scraped vanilla bean
2 cups plain flour
180 grams chopped pistachios (or nut of your choice!)

Cream butter, sugar and vanilla until light and fluffy, mix in flour then add pistachios.

Roll between two sheets of baking paper to 8mm thickness then chill for several minutes.

Cut into star shapes and bake in moderate oven for 15 minutes.





Merry Christmas

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BLACKBERRY & VANILLA MONTE CARLOS

This recipe comes from local artist Amelia Herbertson (she's the clever thing behind my illustrated blog header). I'm a big fan of everything she does, including these delicious biscuits. Thank you Amelia!

200g unsalted butter, softened
1 tsp pure vanilla extract
150g brown sugar
2 eggs
155g self raising flour
110g plain flour
120g almond meal
50g desiccated coconut
150g blackberry jam (we used Huntley Berry Farm jam)

Cream Filling:

60g unsalted butter, softened
120g icing sugar mixture
1 tsp vanilla bean paste
2 tsp milk

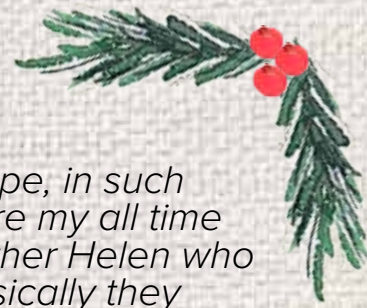
Preheat oven to 180°C (350°F) and line two trays with baking paper.

Beat butter, extract and sugar in electric mixer with paddle attachment until light and fluffy. Add eggs beat until combined. Stir in sifted flours, almond meal and coconut. Using two dessert spoons, form quenelles of dough and place onto baking paper. Place about 5 cm apart. Gently flatten dough with a lightly floured fork. Bake biscuits for about 12 minutes or until lightly browned, leave biscuits on tray to cool.

Meanwhile, make cream filling. Beat butter and sugar in electric mixture until light and fluffy. Beat in vanilla bean paste and milk. Pair up matching sized biscuits, spread one with jam and one with cream filling and gently press two halves together.

Makes 18 large filled biscuits. Store filled biscuits in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 3 days.

MEDAJIER



Normally I avoid glace cherries like the proverbial, but in this recipe, in such small quantities, they seem unavoidable and perfect. Medajler are my all time favourite biscuit and the recipe below belonged to my Grandmother Helen who would make them whenever we visited and always perfectly. Basically they involve two sweet shortcake rounds sandwiched together with a custard filling and finished with what else but a cherry on top! They are quite fiddly and to be honest, a true labour of love - but so delicious and worth the effort. Makes about 20.

1 2/3 cup flour
1/3 cup icing sugar
250g butter, softened and chopped into small pieces
2 egg yolks, lightly beaten

Custard filling:

2 egg yolks
2 tsp caster sugar
1 tsp plain flour
1 cup cream
1/2 tsp vanilla paste

White icing:

1/2 cup icing sugar
Juice of one lemon

To decorate, glace cherries cut into small pieces

Preheat oven to 180C and line a baking tray with paper. Place sugar and flour in a bowl and rub in softened butter until the mixture resembles fine breadcrumbs. Add the yolks and mix to combine. Tip mixture out onto a work surface and gently form into a smooth disc. Cut this in two then form both into discs and wrap in plastic. Rest in the fridge for 30 minutes.

Roll one piece of dough between two sheets of baking paper, until the dough is about 5mm thick. Cut into circle shapes (use a small water glass as a guide or a 4cm-round cookie cutter) and place on prepared tray. Bake for 10 minutes or until biscuits are a light brown. Transfer to a wire rack to cool.

Meanwhile, to make the custard filling, beat the egg and sugar together and add flour. Place cream in a saucepan and bring to almost boiling point. Pour a little of the hot cream into the egg mixture and mix well. Gradually add the rest, beating well after each addition. Pour mixture back into the saucepan and place on a gentle and cook, stirring continuously until the mixture has thickened to a lovely smooth sauce. Add the vanilla and stir. Cool the custard in the fridge (or in the freezer if in a rush).

For the icing, just mix the icing sugar and lemon juice together with a little extra water until you have a smooth, paste-like consistency.

When both the biscuits and custard have cooled completely, and the custard has thickened considerably, assemble by spreading a little custard on half of the biscuit rounds, topping with another and gently spreading 1/2 a teaspoon of the white icing on top. Finish with a piece of glace cherry.





BRUNE KAGER

The classic Scandinavian Christmas treat, brune kager or 'brown biscuit' is a slightly peppery, hard biscuit that works really well when cut into Christmas shapes and decorated with lemon icing. They make great presents and last for ages. Makes about 30.

125g butter, softened
1/3 cup brown sugar
finely grated rind of one orange
1 egg
1/3 cup honey, warmed
3 cups self-raising flour
1 tbsp ground ginger
1 tsp ground allspices
1/4 tsp ground black pepper
1 cup whole blanched almonds
1/3 cup raw sugar

Preheat oven to 180C and line a baking tray with paper.

Cream butter and sugar together until pale and fluffy. Add the rind, egg, and honey and beat until smooth. Sift in flour and spices and stir until well combined.

Shape mixture into a ball, wrap in plastic and place in the fridge to rest for half an hour (or more). Place dough between two sheets of baking paper and roll out to about 4mm thick.

Cut out biscuits with a heart-shaped cutter and arrange on prepared tray. Press an almond into the centre of each and sprinkle with the sugar. Bake for 8-10 minutes, until lightly coloured and let cool on a wire rack.





VANILLEKRANSE

This was another of my grandmother Helen's biscuit recipes and now my clever sister Catherine is in charge of making big batches every Christmas. The biscuit dough itself isn't hard to knock up, but making them look so beautiful does take a good piping bag and patience, both of which I lack. Gran did note in her recipe that you can also roll the dough out into a large rectangle then cut into circles, glaze with beaten egg and sprinkle with chopped almonds or a glace cherry before baking. Makes about 30.

220g caster sugar
350g butter, room temperature
1 egg, lightly beaten
450g plain flour
110g ground almonds
1/2 vanilla bean or 1/2 tsp vanilla paste

Preheat the oven to 180C and line a baking tray with paper.

Beat the sugar and butter together until pale and fluffy.

Add the egg and mix until well incorporated. Fold through the flour, almond meal and vanilla. Cover the dough in plastic and rest in the fridge for half an hour.

Pipe the biscuits into little wreaths as pictured then bake for about 10 minutes or until just lightly coloured. Let cool on a wire rack then store in jars or airtight containers.





Things in Jars



SPICED NUTS

Spicy nuts are always a good idea. Make up a big lot of this recipe and then divide among jars and you've got yourself a great present that doesn't need to live in the fridge, lasts beautifully and is excellent with a glass of bubbles or nice cold beer. Makes about 3 cups.

1 cup sugar
1 tsp sea salt
1/2 tsp fennel seeds
1 pinch cayenne pepper
1/2 tsp smoked paprika
500g nuts (I love a mix of almonds, walnuts, cashews and hazlenuts but whatever you have on hand/fancy is great)
1 egg white

Preheat the oven to 180C and line two trays with greaseproof paper.

Mix the sugar, spices and salt together and add the nuts, mix to combine.

Now whisk the egg white until just frothy then fold this mixture through the nuts. Spread over your trays then bake for 25 minutes, turning the mixture over half way through the cooking time, or until golden.

Let cool completely before breaking the nuts up into jars or containers.





APRICOT JAM

This is my favourite jam to make and eat - there's no peeling involved and because apricots have naturally good pectin levels this jam nearly always sets just as I hope it will. Makes about 3 cups.

1kg fresh apricots
1/2 cup water
6 cups sugar
1 vanilla bean
One lemon, halved

Halve apricots, remove pips and slice halves into half again. Place these in a big saucepan with the water and cook on medium high until the fruit has softened right down.

Squeeze the lemon juice into the saucepan, toss in the squeezed halves, and add sugar and the vanilla bean, scraping the seeds into the hot fruit.

Place a small plate in the freezer and cook the fruit mixture for about 5 minutes at a rolling boil.

To test if it's ready, just drop half a teaspoonful of the jam onto your cold plate. Let it sit a minute and then push your finger through the middle of the jam. If it wrinkles and is feeling nice and thick then it's ready.





CHERRY & VANILLA CORDIAL

This recipe is closely based on one given by Skye Gyngell in My Favourite Ingredients. Skye is one of my favourite food writers and I look to her books often for inspiration. If you haven't come across her wonderful way with flavour, texture and colour please check her out! Makes about one litre.

1kg ripe cherries, second-grade is fine
300g caster sugar
Zest and juice of one lemon
Two vanilla pods
1 litre water

Wash the cherries and let dry in a colander.

Transfer to a large preserving pot or saucepan and add the sugar, lemon juice and zest, the vanilla pods (split and seeds scraped into the mix – don't forget to put the pods in too) and the water.

Stir gently and bring to the boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 20 minutes then let cool slightly.

Pour through a fine-mesh sieve, extracting as much liquid as you can. Then divide among individual bottles, label up and give away!

Just tell the lucky recipients to keep their bottles in the fridge for up to a week (or so).





RASPBERRY VINEGAR CORDIAL

This recipe comes via my late father-in-law Andrew who introduced me to the idea of this beautifully refreshing, tangy cordial only a few years ago. It's great with lots of crushed ice and mineral water but especially good with a splash of vodka too. Makes about 3 litres.

600gm raspberries
2kg white sugar
2 litres white vinegar (the best you can get – half white vinegar and half verjus would also be nice)

Wash the raspberries then drain and place in a large bowl. Add the vinegar and beat together until the mixture becomes a rough slush. Cover with a tea towel and set aside for a day or two (not in the fridge).

Strain mixture through a fine mesh sieve or muslin bag, extracting as much liquid as possible. Transfer to a saucepan and bring mixture to a boil, add the sugar and whisk to combine.

Boil for five minutes then divide between sterilised bottles and immediately seal.





Merry Christmas!

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