

Gifts from the heart of your home

If the kitchen is the heart of the home, then gifts from the heart are easy to give. The time-honoured tradition of baking cookies for friends and family to enjoy at Christmas brings delicious warmth to all.

It is not possible to identify the first cookie maker. Sweet baked morsels have been popular since antiquity when manna was gathered and baked into small breads. Modern cookie baking, however, has everything to do with the refinement and availability of sugar.

The word cookie is distinctly North American and it first appeared around the turn of the 18th century. It was derived from the Dutch word *koekje* for the "little cakes" early settlers brought from Holland. Variations of sweet biscuits came from many emerging cultures in Canada, but these yummy treats were not the booty of every passing child; they were an occasional indulgence brought out as a special delight for festivals and celebrations. Like Christmas.

Baked cookies make a marvellous holiday gift, but for a present that can be savoured later, layer dry cookie ingredients into a glass jar, attach the recipe and decorate with a festive bow or raffia. When the lucky recipient of your gift is ready to bake their cookies, they will add the butter, egg and vanilla. If you choose to use the recipe below for simple Christmas cookies, be sure to attach a holiday cookie cutter.

Simple Christmas Cookies

This basic cookie is often the first to be

eaten from a Christmas tray. In times of opulence, a little simplicity can be welcome. From my book, *Great Canadian Cookies*.

1 cup soft butter
3/4 cup sugar
1 egg
1 tsp vanilla
2 cups flour
1/2 tsp baking powder
1/4 tsp salt
1 tbsp coloured sugar

Cream together butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Beat in egg, then vanilla. Mix together flour, baking powder and salt. Stir flour mixture into creamed butter. Refrigerate for at least one hour.

Roll out cookie dough on a lightly floured surface and use seasonal cookie cutters to make fun shapes. Bake on the middle rack of a preheated 350°F oven for 12 to 15 minutes or until edges are darkened. Let cool, then decorate with icing, coloured sugar and candy.

Makes about four dozen cookies.

Date Oatmeal Cookies

Of all my Grandma Gladys' many incredible cookies, these are my favourite. This recipe first appeared in *Recipes for Homemade Love*, my tribute to the fine cooking of Canada's grandparents.

1 cup sugar
1 cup brown sugar
1 cup soft butter
2 eggs

1/4 cup whipping cream
1 tsp vanilla
2 cups all-purpose flour
1 tsp cinnamon
1 tsp baking powder
1/2 tsp baking soda
1/2 tsp salt
2 1/4 cups quick-cooking oats
1/2 cup chopped dates

Cream together sugars and butter. Beat in eggs, cream and vanilla. Sift together flour, cinnamon, baking powder, baking soda and salt; stir in oats and

My Muskoka Kitchen



Pamela Steel

dates. Fold dry ingredients into creamed mixture. Refrigerate for one hour.

Roll dough into one-inch balls and place one inch apart on an ungreased cookie sheet. Do not flatten. Bake in a preheated 350°F oven for seven to 10 minutes or until edges are darkened.

Makes about eight dozen cookies.

Calling Muskoka's cooks

Have you got what it takes to be crowned Chef Worthy?

By Kim Good

Tired of the constant bragging about the cooking creations of your coworker when it's your bouillabaisse that can't be beat? Have your dinner parties declined into a game of one-upmanship between you and your best friend, much to the delight of the other attendees?

Whether it's sibling rivalry or your mother-in-law's constant critiques that have you dying to prove your prowess in the kitchen,

now's your chance.

After a successful inaugural season based in Toronto, *Chef Worthy*, produced by Big Coat Productions, is casting its nets further afield looking for amateur cooks in Ottawa, Peterborough, Belleville and Muskoka to go head-to-head with a rival.

Ideally, you have an agreeable competitor in mind to battle it out on national TV, but if not, single cooks looking to challenge themselves may also be paired up for the show.

The kitchen competition begins with the would-be chefs creating a dish of their choosing in their own home under the watchful and critical eye of the host, Chef Michael Potters.

Potters has 27 years experience as a chef and has owned his own restaurant, Harvest located in Prince Edward County, for the last five years, so he won't be easy to impress.

"These are people who think they can cook," says Potters. "It doesn't necessarily mean they can."

The second step in the cook-off takes place in a restaurant setting. For Muskoka cooks, a local restaurant will be asked to host the event, which thrusts competitors into the high-pressure setting of a professional chef.

"There's timelines, the kitchen hustle and bustle, hurry up and get it done pressure," says Potters.

"When they go into a restaurant, they are under stress, and it does show."

The final phase of the competition occurs in the studio, where the challengers participate in an *Iron Chef*-style cook-off. Each is given the same ingredients and 45 minutes to create their masterpiece.

"I've seen some people pull together some amazing things," says Potters. "I've been really surprised."

Potters describes the show as fun and promises he is no Gordon Ramsay, the volatile chef of *Hell's Kitchen* fame. Although, he does warn that participants have to be open to whatever goes on.

"We do some funny things to throw people off balance," explains Potters. "Some people perform well; others fall apart."

Chef Worthy airs Saturdays on the W Network at 1 p.m. and on Viva at 7 p.m. Twenty-six cooks will be needed for the 13-episode second season, which begins shooting at the end of January.

To apply for your shot at the title of Chef Worthy, go to bigcoatproductions.com and click the Casting tab to download the application form. Email to aimee@bigcoatproductions.com or mail to 145 Front Street East, Suite 105, Toronto, ON, M5A 1E3. Applications must be received by the beginning of January in order to be considered.

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