

Mikal Eledge email: mikal.eledge@gmail.com

Dr. O'Donnell

English 3130

April 25, 2018

A Beginner's Guide to Authentic Scottish Shortbread

Shortbread has long been a popular sweet treat in Scotland, and now it's catching on here at home. For those wanting to partake of a real Scottish recipe, you've come to the right place.

The mention of Scottish cuisine no doubt brings up a number of apprehensive thoughts for the average reader. In truth, it isn't all haggis and blood sausage, or strange puddings and pies with names that are slightly off-putting. There is also the most often overlooked and, debatably, the most delicious of Scottish dishes: shortbread.

Shortbread has worked its way into the American people's consciousness. It's not a rare find at the grocery store, usually in a tin shaped like a Scottie dog or decorated with a red and green tartan pattern, and it's even become one of the many, much-loved Girl Scout cookie varieties. I am often surprised by the number of people who tell me that they've never cared for shortbread, that it's too dry or too bland. I can only imagine it's because they've never had "real

Scottish” shortbread, a thought which I usually keep to myself out of a desire to avoid sounding too pretentious. I can honestly say, though, that I have yet to find someone who tries my gran’s shortbread and can still say that shortbread “isn’t for them”.

My grandma was born Wilma Laing in 1939 in Edinburgh, Scotland. It was there that she grew up and learned to bake shortbread by watching her mother and grandmother. Like every family does with their local dishes, the Laings made the recipe for shortbread their own over the years with little changes that somehow made a big difference. Eventually, my grandmother met and married my Dutch grandpa, Dick van Oostenrijk, and she brought the Laing shortbread recipe with her to America, to pass down to her own family.

What exactly is shortbread?

Shortbread is so named because it is made without any kind of rising agent and therefore doesn’t rise, staying “short”. (At least, that’s how my gran always told it.) Shortbread is very much like a sugar cookie. It’s flat and incredibly sweet but is richer in flavor and has a more firm and flaky texture instead of a soft or doughy one. Although store bought shortbread can be very good, it doesn’t really compare to the homemade variety.

Shortbread was first developed into what it is known as today in the 16th century. Some credit its development to Mary, Queen of Scots. Originally, shortbread was very expensive to make and the baking of the dessert was reserved for special occasions such as birthdays, Christmas, or Hogmanay, the Scottish New Year celebration.

My Gran and Her Shortbread

When my grandma was a child, during World War II, shortbread was once again an expensive treat, as wartime rations made butter, flour, and sugar precious commodities. My grandma often told us stories about cooking with her mother on their wood stove, explaining how a sprinkle of flour could be used to gauge the heat of the stove. The flour was spread out evenly and the time it took the flour to burn, as well as where it burned, determined the heat and what part of the stove would be best to cook on. This impressive feat is one I have yet to learn, but the stories always fascinated me.

As my grandma grew older, shortbread would become an inexpensive dish that she often made for desserts, bake sales, and as gifts to family friends and neighbors. Considering it's made without eggs, milk, baking soda or any other rising agent, it was easy to make and not hard to afford. Everyone from family friends to the members of the churches whose bake sales she participated in still ask about my granny's shortbread. She even won first place at the Jonesborough Highland Festival's shortbread baking contest one year, although she is much too modest to brag about it.

My First Attempt at Shortbread

I was sixteen the first time my grandma let me help her make shortbread. Although I spent a lot of time at my grandparents house growing up, nearly none of that time was spent in the kitchen. My grandma was a busy woman and preferred to get the cooking done as quickly as possible so she could move on to the next task that needed done. When she asked if I wanted to

help her prepare the shortbread for dessert, I was shocked. I was happy to see and to take part though.

I remember being surprised by how easy it turned out to be. There are only three ingredients and the preparation is incredibly easy to follow.

She had me measure out the flour and sugar into a ceramic mixing bowl and then added a stick of butter, which had been sitting out just long enough to make it soft.

She then began to mix it, letting me help for a while while she explained the importance of hand kneading the dough.

Once it was fully mixed and at the right thickness, she rolled the dough into a soft ball to keep it from crumbling apart on its way to the baking sheet.

The pan was neither greased nor coated with flour and this surprised me. I asked her then if we would need a rolling pin and she said, “No, no. It’s much better to do it by hand.” With a dismissive wave of her hand that seemed to say that I was being silly and that I ought to know better.

She explained, as she pushed the dough into a round disk shape, that it was better not to use a rolling pin, if you wanted to maintain the firm and flaky consistency good shortbread is known for.

Once she had flattened it to an equal thickness across its whole surface, she showed me how she used a fork to press the sides of the round, flat dough in so it wouldn’t spread out unevenly. Then she marked where she would cut it when cool with a cookie cutter that resembled a flower with eight pointed petals.

We slid it in the oven, which she had preheat earlier and left the kitchen almost uncomfortably warm, and an hour later it it was ready to come out, pale gold and smelling fantastic. Once it had cooled, she let me cut it, using the little fork marks as a guide.

Now, as an adult, I still fall back on shortbread when I need to make something simple and sweet. Most of the people who eat the shortbread I make don't really care about the reasons behind why the dough is prepared how it is, or how the methods of baking it developed. Of course, neither of these things are really required to make and enjoy good shortbread. All you truly need is flour, sugar, and butter.

As much as I've said that the recipe is simple and shockingly easy, it seems that everyone to whom we've given our recipe claims that it never turns out just right. It might be that the kneading of the dough and the odd marks all shortbread seem to bear are really more important than we ever realized, but maybe the answer is a simple, if not a tad superstitious one. Perhaps it's one of those things, like finding the sound of bagpipes soothing or being perfectly willing to eat haggis, that you simply have to be at least a little Scottish to do.

The Recipe

Ingredients:

- 1 stick of butter
- 1 cup flour
- 1/4 cup of sugar



Step 1:

Preheat the oven to 300 degrees.

Step 2:

Mix ingredients into a medium-large bowl.



Step 3:

Knead the dough with your hands until it has a fluffy consistency.

Step 4:

Roll the dough into a ball and place on an un-greased cooking sheet.



Step 4

Step 5:

Flatten the dough into a circle about 1/2 inch thick.



Step 5

Step 6:

Use a fork to press the sides of the dough in.

Step 7:

Place in the oven for 1 hour.



Step 6

Step 8:

Remove and let cool, then cut into slices.