

Chocolate Cut-Out Cookies with Royal Icing

a recipe from www.maureenabood.com

The key to cut-out cookies that hold their shape is a single mantra: chill, chill, chill the dough. Taking the extra 15-minute chill increments makes a difference. These cookies are based on a recipe from Smitten Kitchen, and despite the simple list of ingredients they impart deep chocolate flavor. I like Droste or Sharffenberger cocoa powder, but any will do. I roll my dough to ¼-inch thickness, but it can be rolled thinner, 1/8-inch. Makes about 40 3 ½ -inch cookies.

3 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
1 cup salted butter, softened
1 1/2 cups sugar
2 large eggs
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
2/3 cup unsweetened cocoa powder

Whisk dry flour, salt and baking powder in bowl and set aside. Mix butter, sugar, eggs, vanilla and cocoa in mixer, using the paddle attachment. Gradually add flour mixture, and mix until smooth. Wrap in plastic and chill for at least one hour and up to two days. The longer the dough is chilled, the longer it needs to sit out before rolling (at least an hour if the dough has been chilled for a day or longer).

Pre-heat the oven to 350 degrees. Line heavy baking sheets with parchment paper. Roll out cookie dough between two sheets of waxed paper. For chilled dough that is still somewhat hard, bang the rolling pin down on the dough to soften and begin to flatten it. Roll from the center out, holding the paper down with something heavy or grabbing the paper between you and the counter's edge to hold it in place while you roll.

Dip the cutters in flour (or cocoa powder) before cutting, each time you cut shapes. Chill the rolled, cut dough (waxed paper and all) in the refrigerator for 15 minutes (on a sheet pan if needed for a flat surface in the fridge). Transfer the shapes to the sheets using a metal spatula. If using decorating sugar, gently press it into the cookies now, before baking. Bake for 8 to 11 minutes (the former for 1/8-inch thick cookies, the latter for 1/4-inch cookies) until the edges are firm and the centers are slightly soft and puffed.

Gently press dough scraps together and wrap in plastic. Chill and repeat the process, using fresh waxed paper each time you roll out a new batch.

Transfer baked cookies to a wire rack to cool. Decorate with royal icing or butter icing, or with powdered sugar.

For the Royal Icing

Not all meringue powder is created equal. Williams-Sonoma, Ateco, and AmeriColor have better

flavor than craft-store brands, but any will work. The thick royal icing keeps for a week in the refrigerator, covered with plastic wrap right up against the icing. The thinner “flood” icing should be used right away; let it sit, covered in the same way, for a few minutes before using to let the air bubbles surface. I use a #2 tip for outlining and a #1 tip for decorating.

4 tablespoons meringue powder (find it online or at craft stores)
Scant ½ cup water, plus more for different consistencies
1 teaspoon corn syrup (optional, for shine)
1 lb. powdered sugar, sifted
Gel icing colors (if using)

Using a stand or hand-held mixer (paddle attachment), beat the meringue powder and water until incorporated and foamy. Add the powdered sugar and corn syrup, and beat on low speed until stiff peaks form, about 5 minutes.

Different consistencies of icing are needed for various tasks: thicker icing is necessary to pipe the outer edges of the cookie (this holds the flooded icing in place) and to decorate the top, but not so thick that you can barely squeeze it out of the piping bag. Thinner icing is necessary to flood the cookie with icing—the icing should run in a ribbon off of a spoon the bowl of icing, forming a line that stays on top of the icing briefly before sinking in.

If you are coloring the icing, divide the icing into bowls at this stage and add very small amounts of coloring at a time (a little goes a long way). Adding a small amount of brown to any color can give it depth. Be sure to keep the icing covered directly on the surface with plastic wrap at all times, or a skin will form. The icing will keep in the refrigerator for a day or so; reconstitute it by stirring it and adding a touch of warm water as needed.

To spread or ‘flood’ the outlined cookie with icing, spoon it on and push it into the corners with the back of the spoon rather than piping it; this makes the flooding easier to control, I found. Let the flooded icing dry on the cookies for a couple of hours or overnight in a cool, dry place.

Pipe your decoration on the cookies, first practicing your design on waxed paper. Let the piped design dry before handling the cookies.