

Little Almond Cookies

Cantucci

Serves 8 – 12

- 1/4 cup blanched almonds
- 1/2 cup un-blanched almonds
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- Pinch salt
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 2 eggs
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/2 teaspoon almond extract
- 2 teaspoons grated orange peel
- 1 egg white (for brushing on cookies)

To Prepare

1. Preheat the oven to 350° F.
2. Place both the blanched and un-blanched almonds on an aluminum cookie sheet and toast in the preheated oven for 15 minutes, stirring halfway through so as to brown evenly, until lightly golden-browned.
3. Grind 1/4 cup of mixed blanched and un-blanched toasted almonds very finely, then cut the remaining toasted almonds into two or three pieces.
4. Place all of the dry ingredients, including the ground pieces of almonds, in a mixer and mix a few seconds. In a separate bowl, beat the eggs and mix in the honey, vanilla and almond extracts and orange peel. With the mixer running, gradually add the egg mixture to the flour-almond mixture and mix until a dough is formed.
5. Divide the dough into 4 pieces. With your hands, shape each piece into a long, thin roll (about 3/4-inch in diameter) then place widely apart, on a buttered and floured cookie sheet or on a parchment-paper lined sheet pan. You may need to flour your hands to ease the rolling.

Johnny & Damian say . . .

J: *Cantucci? These sure look like biscotti to me!*

D: *They pretty much are, which is fine news. But the Tuscans go back to their own local dialect and call them cantucci. And they have lots of opportunities to use the word, since they munch on these things off and on all day, then enjoy them after pretty much every meal with a glass of vin santo.*

J: *And just like you taught me about the name “biscotti”—meaning twice-cooked—these cookies get baked once in a big loaf, then sliced into the familiar shape and baked again. They get dry and crisp from all that time in the oven—exactly the kind of taste and texture you’re looking for when you’re having an espresso.*

D: *Or a vin santo. Everybody needs a little holy wine!*

6. Beat the egg white slightly in a small bowl and lightly coat the tops of the 4 rolls with it, using a pastry brush, then put the baking sheet in the preheated oven for 15 – 20 minutes.

7. Remove the rolls from oven (they will have expanded in size sideways). Lower the oven temperature to 275° F. Cut the rolls with a long, serrated, slicing knife at a 45° angle every $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch, to get the shape required for this type of biscotti.

8. Place the biscotti back in the oven, with a $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch space between each biscotto, for 20 – 30 minutes. The biscotti will be very dry. Remove from the oven and let cool.





Apple Cake

Torta di Mele

Serves 8

1 stick unsalted butter, softened
3/4 cup sugar
Pinch salt
3 eggs
2 cups all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/8 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
1/2 cup milk
Zest of 1 lemon
4 apples
1 tablespoon sugar
1/4 teaspoon cinnamon

To Prepare

1. Preheat the oven to 350° F.
2. Beat the butter, sugar and salt with an electric mixer until fluffy. Add the eggs one at a time while mixing, beating well before the next addition. Sift the flour, baking powder and nutmeg together and add to the bowl, adding half the flour and half the milk, then the remaining flour and the remaining milk. Add the lemon zest.
3. Line a 9-inch spring-form pan with parchment paper. Butter the pan. Spread the batter evenly in the pan.
4. Peel, halve and core the apples. Cut each half into 4 wedges. Fan the apple slices out from the center on top of the batter. Mix the sugar and cinnamon together. Sprinkle cinnamon-sugar over apples. Bake until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean, about 40 minutes. Cool for 10 minutes, then remove from the pan and continue to cool on a wire rack.

To Serve

Remove to a decorative serving plate and serve at room temperature.

Johnny & Damian say . . .

D: *Tuscans love a good apple. There are almost always apples in the markets, and according to European tradition sometimes the best dessert is a nice piece of fresh fruit. It's not like every day, every meal, you have to have this big double-chocolate thing.*

J: *I guess if you want to have your cake and eat your apple too, this is the recipe for you. You just make a simple, flavorful cake and fan out the slices of apple on top. They turn all golden brown in the oven with that extra sprinkle of cinnamon sugar. It's a delicious way to end a Tuscan meal. Or a Texan meal, for that matter.*



Apple Fritters

❁ Frittelle di Mele

Makes about 20 frittelle

1½ cups all-purpose flour

⅛ teaspoon kosher salt

1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil

2 eggs, separated

¾ cup cold water

1 tablespoon apple grappa or some other good grappa

4 medium apples

1 lemon

Extra-virgin olive oil for deep frying

½ cup granulated sugar

1 tablespoon cinnamon

To Prepare

1. In a bowl, mix together the flour and salt. Make a well in the center of the flour and add the tablespoon of olive oil and the egg yolks. Start adding the water and mixing. When all the water has been added, the batter should be like a thick pancake batter; if needed, add more water. Add grappa; set aside to rest for 1 hour.

2. Peel and core the apples, then slice them into ¼-inch thick circles. Place the slices in a bowl and squeeze the juice of the lemon over them and toss to coat. Mix the ½ cup sugar and the cinnamon together.

3. When the batter has rested for an hour, heat the oil in a saucepan to 375° F. Beat the egg whites until stiff and fold into the batter.

4. Dip the apple slices in the batter and fry in preheated hot oil until golden brown on both sides, 2 – 3 minutes. Drain on paper towels and sprinkle with cinnamon-sugar.



Johnny & Damian say . . .

J: *I like the way the name kind of rhymes... frittelle di mele. Sounds so much better than just calling them apple fritters.*

D: *Still, people talk bad about "frittering away" all your time. I think frittering away your time is great, as long as you end up with fritters like these. And it's important to use slightly soft, sweet apples for this, so both the texture and the taste are right. One of those tart apples like Granny Smith is terrific for baking—but not for frittering away your time.*



Candied Figs

Fichi Canditi

Serves 6

1/3 cup granulated sugar

18 figs, peeled

Grated zest of 1 lemon

2 tablespoons honey

Almond oil

To Prepare

1. Preheat the oven to 350° F. Sprinkle half of the sugar on the bottom of a baking pan. Cover the sugar with the figs, followed by the remaining sugar, lemon zest and honey. Lightly toss the figs to coat them thoroughly.
2. Bake 30 minutes, until the sugar caramelizes. Brush a serving dish with a little almond oil and transfer the figs to the dish with a spatula. Chill briefly in the refrigerator.

Johnny & Damian say . . .

D: *Here's something you and I know all about, Johnny. Figs! All of our Sicilian relatives loved figs when we were growing up, and lots of them had fig trees in their yards. It was Texas, not Sicily – but when the figs were fresh, there was this race to use them up in as many ways as you could think of.*

J: *And those you couldn't use up, you carried in a bucket over to some other relative or neighbor, who was probably trying to get rid of his figs, too. When figs come in, they really come in.*

D: *Turning figs into a candy was one of the really old and wonderful ways of seizing that moment and making it last and last. That's a lesson we should try to learn from the old ways. It would probably help us with lots of things that aren't figs.*

Chocolate Mousse

❧ *Spuma di Cioccolata*

Serves 6

6 ounces semi-sweet chocolate

3 tablespoons sugar

4 eggs, separated

1/4 cup espresso

2 tablespoons grappa

2/3 cup whipping cream, chilled

1/8 teaspoon salt

Johnny & Damian say . . .

D: *This is chocolate mousse, Italian-style—with a much better name. Who wants to eat a mousse anyway? Too many disturbing pictures come to mind.*

J: *But with spuma, all you picture is something light and frothy, something whipped or sprayed with air 'til it just about floats away. There's a lot of recipes for spuma—and, of course, chocolate mousse—out there. But we think you need to add this one to your collection.*

To Prepare

1. Melt the chocolate in a bowl, over simmering water.

2. In another bowl, beat 2 tablespoons of the sugar with the egg yolks, until the mixture is pale yellow. Mix in the melted chocolate, espresso and grappa. Whisk the cream until it is stiff, then fold it into the chocolate mixture in 3 batches.

3. Whip the egg whites with the salt until stiff, then fold it into the chocolate mixture. Spoon into dessert glasses and refrigerate overnight. Top with whipped cream and chocolate shavings, if desired.



Cooked Cream with Orange

❦ *Panna Cotta al Arancia*

Serves 6 – 8

Panna Cotta Ingredients:

- 2 tablespoons unflavored gelatin
- 4 tablespoons water
- 4 cups heavy cream
- 1 tablespoon Grand Marnier or orange liqueur
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar
- Rind of 1 large orange (no pith)

Garnish Ingredients:

- 4 oranges
- 3 cups water, plus more to boil peel
- 1 cup, plus 3 tablespoons dry white wine
- $1\frac{1}{3}$ cups sugar
- 3 whole cloves
- 3 tablespoons Grand Marnier

To Prepare the Panna Cotta

1. Soften the gelatin in the water for 3 minutes. Warm the cream with the Grand Marnier, sugar and the orange rind in a heavy saucepan over low heat. Do not allow to boil. Remove from the heat and stir in the softened gelatin.
2. Remove the rind. Pour the cream into ramekins and chill for 4 hours.

To Prepare the Garnish

1. Strip oranges from top to bottom, being careful to get the peel only and not the white pith. Cut the peel into very thin julienne.
2. Bring water to a boil. Add peel and boil 5 minutes. Drain and transfer to non-aluminum saucepan. Add the 3 cups of water, 1 cup of wine, sugar and cloves to the saucepan.

Johnny & Damian say . . .

D: *Here's an ancient dessert that chefs have recently rediscovered. These days they frou-frou it up all over the place, you know, adding lavender or wasabi or whatever, and then maybe building this fireworks display of spun sugar. Tuscans don't think like that, eat like that or cook like that.*

J: *I especially like the way we keep it simple. I mean, how complicated is something called "cooked cream" supposed to be? And the orange flavor is really nice, kind of refreshing. We always love all the oranges we taste down in Sicily, and now we can be glad those Italian truckers keep burning up the autostrada with oranges just for Tuscany.*

3. Bring saucepan contents to a boil and cook until syrupy and medium-caramel in color. Remove from heat and stir in the 3 tablespoons of wine and the Grand Marnier. Allow to cool. Peel away all white pith from the oranges and divide into segments.

To serve

Dip ramekins in hot water and run a thin knife around the inner edge of the ramekin. Un-mold onto a serving plate. Garnish with orange segments and candied peel.





Johnny & Damian say . . .

D: *Man, bomboloni is Tuscany—they're my downfall.*

J: *I'd say you kind of fell down a long time ago.*

D: *No, Johnny, I'm serious. There I am in Florence, and I get up from lunch and, you know, it seems like a long time until dinner. And always, right when I'm thinking about them, there's this little place on the corner serving up the best bomboloni you ever had.*

Cream-Filled Doughnuts

❧ *Bomboloni*

Makes 24 – 28 doughnuts

Italian Custard Cream Ingredients: (*Yields 9 cups*)

- 6 egg yolks
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 2 tablespoons cornstarch
- 2 cups milk
- 2 pieces of lemon peel (yellow skin only)
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Doughnut Ingredients:

- 1 cup lukewarm milk
- 2 packages active dry yeast
- 3 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/3 cup sugar
- 2 eggs
- 1/4 cup unsalted butter, softened
- Zest of 1 lemon
- 1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
- 5 cups vegetable oil for frying

To Prepare Cream Filling

- 1.** Put the egg yolks and sugar into a heavy saucepan or in the upper half of a double boiler. Away from the heat, beat the eggs and sugar until they are pale yellow and creamy. Add the flour and cornstarch.
- 2.** In another pan bring all the milk just to the brink of a boil, when the edge begins to be ringed with little bubbles. Add the hot milk very gradually to the eggs-and-flour mixture, always away from the heat. Stir to avoid lumps.
- 3.** Put the saucepan over low heat (or over the lower half of a double boiler in which the water has been brought to a boil). Cook for about 5 minutes, stirring with a wooden spoon. Do not let the mixture come to a boil. Remove from heat and continue to stir for 2 more minutes. Remove the lemon peel and pour into a bowl. Let cool; cover and refrigerate.

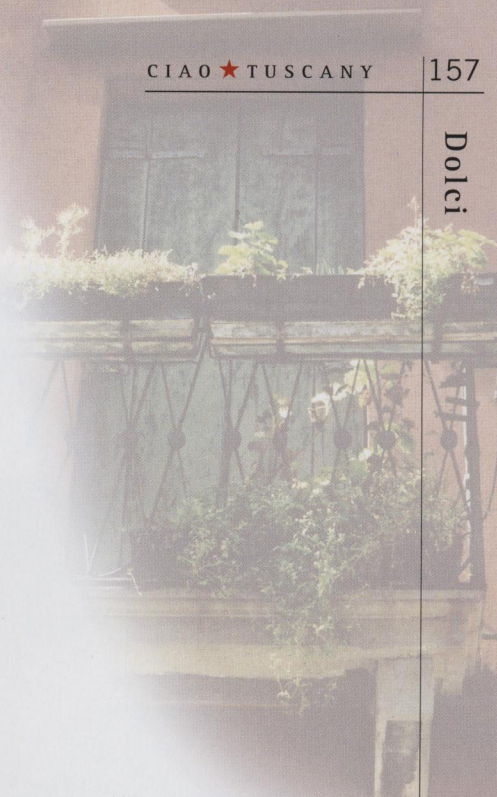
Note: For chocolate crema pasticcera, omit the lemon peel and add 4 ounces chopped semi-sweet chocolate to the hot pastry cream as it comes off the stove.

To prepare Doughnuts

1. Combine the milk and yeast in a mixing bowl until yeast is dissolved and foamy, about 10 minutes. Add the flour, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the sugar, eggs, butter, lemon zest and salt. Mix completely until a dough is formed.
2. Knead the dough on a lightly floured board until it is smooth, then place it back in the bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Let the dough rise at room temperature until doubled in bulk, about 2 hours.
3. On a lightly floured surface, punch down the dough and roll it out to about $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch thick. Loosen it from the board and let it retract, then roll it out again. With a 3-inch cookie cutter, cut out as many circles as you can—gathering the scraps and rolling them out to make more circles.
4. Spoon 1 heaping teaspoon of the Crema atop half of the circles. Moisten the edges with a tiny amount of water, then top with the remaining dough circles. Seal the edges well with your fingers. Cover the Bombolini with a cotton dishtowel and let rise for 1 hour.
5. Heat the oil in a deep, round pot to 375° F. Carefully lower the Bombolini into the oil and fry until golden brown on both sides, 2 – 3 minutes. Drain on paper towels.

To Serve

Dust generously with the remaining sugar. Serve warm.





Johnny & Damian say . . .

J: *You can almost hear the first cook who ever made these cookies naming them right on the spot. They really are "ugly but good."*

D: *Shssh, Johnny. Don't say that so loud. You don't want to hurt their feelings. Don't you know that somewhere there's a mother who thinks each one is beautiful? You make these cookies, and you might end up agreeing with Mamma.*

"Ugly But Good" Cookies

Brutti ma Buoni

Makes 32 cookies

- 2 cups hazelnuts
- 9 large egg whites
- 1 cup plus 3 tablespoons sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla
- 1/4 teaspoon salt

To Prepare

1. Preheat the oven to 325° F.
2. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper, and spread hazelnuts in a single layer on the sheet. Place in the oven, and toast until nuts smell sweet, about 10 – 12 minutes. Wrap the warm nuts in a coarse-textured kitchen towel. Rub to remove skins from nuts and discard skins. Chop hazelnuts to the size of lentils; set aside.
3. In the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with a whisk attachment, beat the egg whites on low speed until foamy. Add the sugar gradually, beating on medium-high until stiff peaks form and the meringue is stiff and shiny, 3 – 5 minutes.
4. Fold in the chopped hazelnuts, vanilla and salt using a large rubber spatula.
5. Transfer this mixture to a shallow, heavy-bottomed saucepan and set over medium-low heat, stirring constantly until the mixture turns light brown and pulls away from the sides, 10 – 15 minutes.
6. Remove the mixture from the heat and transfer to a bowl to cool slightly, about 5 minutes.
7. Using 2 spoons, drop the batter in heaping teaspoons onto a baking sheet lined with a nonstick mat, spacing the cookies about 1 1/2-inches apart. Bake until they are firm to the touch, but still a bit chewy inside, 25 – 30 minutes. Turn the oven off and let the cookies sit in the oven for another 20 minutes. Remove the pan from the oven. Transfer the cookies from the baking sheet and cool on a rack.