

Swapping Stories

BY COURTNEY HOLLANDS



here's no better way to spread the fresh-from-the-oven love—while diversifying your dessert platter—than with a cookie swap, where the lore around the special recipes is just as important as the sugar rush.

“You're creating a whole other set of memories in getting friends together and sharing stories,” says pastry chef and part-time Maine resident Julia M. Usher, author of *Cookie Swap: Creative Treats to Share Throughout the Year*. Ahead, learn about traditional and not-so-traditional exchanges throughout the Northeast—and get inspired to host your own. Ready, set, frost!

MAINE

Western Maine Wellesley Club

About 25 (and growing!) Wellesley College alumnae who live in western Maine—each bearing two dozen cookies—attend this annual exchange, held in early December at seven-time host Laurie Jensen's Cape Elizabeth seaside home. “It's just fun,” says Jensen, a member of the college's class of 1970, who mulls cider from Hannaford for the fete. “It's another venue for us to get together without having to talk about a book we've read, that's not a board meeting.” And it's all about promoting holiday cheer to the next generation, too: After nibbling and packing up a few take-home cookies (classic *cantuccini*, or almond biscotti, made by Ann Landsberg, class of 1969, were a recent favorite), the alumnae divide the rest of the sweet bounty into care packages—which include handwritten notes—and mail them to first-year Wellesley College students from the area as a pick-me-up during finals week.

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Inn to Inn Holiday Cookie and Candy Tour

When it comes to holiday baking, Bobby Barker and Tim Ostendorf, owners and innkeepers of the Inn at Crystal Lake in Eaton, don't mess around. They'll whip up close to 2,000 cookies—Ostendorf notes that their popular cornmeal cookies with apricot and sage were “just different enough so that people were interested”—for the 22nd annual Inn to Inn Holiday Cookie and Candy Tour this December 8 and 9. Over the course of the weekend, around 450 people will try two varieties at each of the participating inns throughout the White Mountains region, and take home a cookbook with all the recipes plus an ornament. And the inns pull out all the decorating stops (Ostendorf fondly recalls the year his went with a Tartan theme) and offer lodging packages and complementary activities, such as wreath-making or craft fairs; some of the proceeds go to

charity, too. “It's a great kick-start to December and the season, and all that entails,” Ostendorf says.

MASSACHUSETTS

Flour Bakery + Cafe

When Flour Bakery + Cafe founder Joanne Chang went on tour for *Flour: Spectacular Recipes from Boston's Flour Bakery + Cafe* in 2010, one book-signing event featured a cookie swap. Inspired, she hosted her own public swap at one of the bakery's Cambridge locations, donating all the entry-fee proceeds. Fast-forward nine years, and attendance at this annual charity event has grown to 50-plus bakers, each toting two dozen cookies to trade. (Flour usually kicks in two kinds of cookies—like their popular double chocolate—plus a gift card for the most festive outfit, and compiles a booklet of all the recipes submitted in advance.) “A person comes and brings one friend and then the next year, the same people bring three friends,” says assistant executive pastry chef Jessica Morris. “It's turning into a friends and family event, and we see a lot of the same faces every year.” Join the club: This year's party is on December 9 at Flour's Cambridgeport outpost.

NEW YORK

Trailsweepers Snow & Sports Club

The reigning champion at this Hudson Valley outdoors group's annual bake-off—Patti Downey and her layered, tri-color Venetians—isn't technically a skier at all. But her husband, Randy, is. “The poor guy tried to teach me to ski years ago and I almost killed myself just getting off the lift,” Downey says. “So now I'm happy to send him off with the cookies and stay home, safe and sound.” Around 20 Trailsweepers make confections for the competition and exchange, held at the group's December

meeting and organized for the past two decades by member and former president Janet Mihm, who contributes decorations, prizes, and some variation on white chocolate-dipped gingerbread stars flecked with sprinkles. The bakers and other members vote on the winners, and though Downey's bars have come out on top for at least three years running, they aren't the only entry in demand: “If someone doesn't bring their cookie recipe, they get badgered for it,” Mihm says with a laugh.

VERMONT

Dorset Historical Society

Come the first Saturday every December, the Dorset Historical Society showcases the festive customs of different eras in the small Vermont town's 250-year history. The displays often include cookies and cakes made from recipes popular in the same time period (such as English Spice cookies, from a recipe published in 1927 in the now-defunct weekly newspaper the *Dorset Docket*). “As we look at the holidays and try to recreate what's meaningful to people, there's always food in any celebration,” says curator Jon Mathewson, who first culled the sweet recipes from archived newspapers and personal collections for the Holiday Open House a few years ago. “And our tastes have changed, just like our Christmas trees have.” The society prints off recipes so visitors can replicate the desserts at home, but there's one that staffers don't divulge: Aunt Maria's Sugar Cookies, produced, then mailed all over the country—even to the Queen of England—by two Dorset sisters in the 1950s and '60s. Although the society has permission for a baker with an original cutter to make the thin, flower-shaped treats for the open house, the recipe is under copyright.



DOUBLE CHOCOLATE COOKIES

CORNMEAL COOKIES WITH APRICOT AND SAGE

CANTUCCINI

GINGERBREAD STARS

ENGLISH SPICE COOKIES

👉 Head to hannaford.com/fresh to find the five cookie recipes pictured here!



Swap to It

"A cookie swap is probably one of the easiest parties to host because the guests share in the work *and* the fun," Usher says. Ready to host one of your own? Here are her tips for getting started.

INVITE RIGHT

On the invitation, indicate how many cookies to bring—around three to five dozen is typical, says Usher. Worried about a sugar-cookie onslaught? Add a prompt, like this one: "Get creative and show us your latest and best cookie recipe!"

GATHER RECIPES

Request that attendees bring cards printed with their recipes for guests to take home, or have everyone email you recipes in advance so you can compile them into souvenir booklets.

GET FESTIVE

"Staging the table nicely is important," Usher says. Set out cookie stands of varying heights so guests can choose their place. Also, provide place cards for attendees to label their cookies and list any allergens.

SEND 'EM HOME

Usher's only firm rule: Swappers should depart with as many cookies as they brought (or a little less, as sampling is a given). Guests can pack up cookies in their own containers or you can offer parchment-lined keepsake boxes—however they transport their treasures, remind them to separate and store cookies by type at home to keep the flavors distinct.