



Julia M. Usher

Julia Usher is an engineer turned business consultant turned pastry chef. Throughout her amazing journey, she enjoyed an insatiable sweet tooth and a fascination for lavishly decorated sweets and tabletops — passions that she decided to parlay into a career. Today, Julia is a freelance food writer and food stylist who focuses on desserts and party design, she has authored two books — “Cookie Swap: Creative Treats to Share Throughout the Year” (Gibbs Smith, 2009), and “Ultimate Cookies” (Gibbs Smith, 2011) — and most recently, she released a series of cookie-decorating instructional videos. Driven by a belief that God is in the details, Julia knows that a carefully planned recipe and an exquisitely prepared treat mean so much more than something delicious to eat.





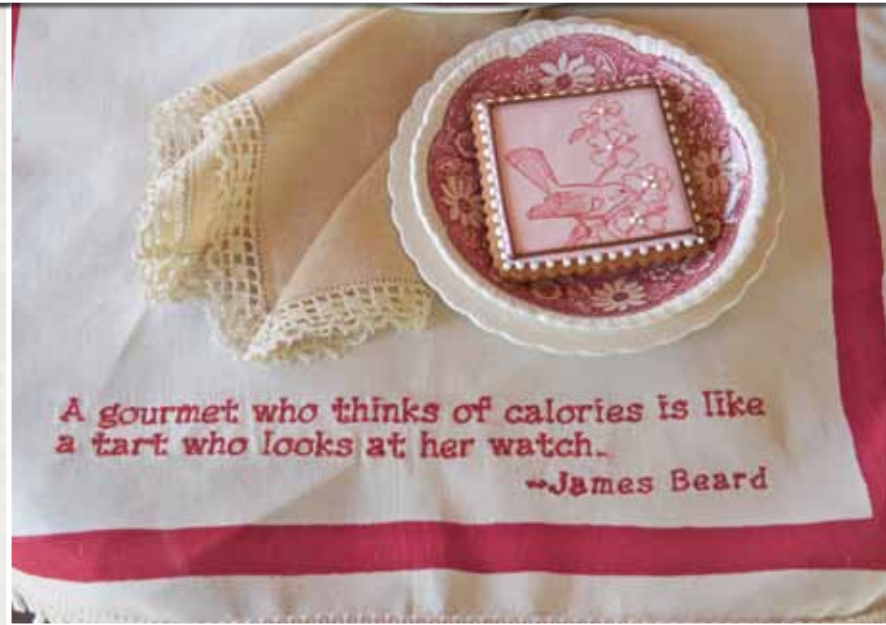
There are few things in life more satisfying to me than watching people's eyes light up when they see a remarkable dessert and hearing their "Oohs" and "Ahhs" as they bite into one. I love creating one-of-a-kind moments for my readers and guests — visual and taste experiences that they're unlikely to encounter anywhere else.

I have a BS and MS in mechanical engineering and an MBA from Stanford. Upon graduating from Yale, I worked for General Electric designing thermal hydraulic systems for nuclear reactors. In 1987, I was hired as a business analyst for the worldwide management-consulting firm Bain & Company. All the while I was passionate about food, and baking and decorating were major hobbies of mine. It wasn't until 1994 that I decided to turn my passion into my profession. I enrolled in cooking school (The Cambridge School of Culinary Arts) and graduated 10 months later with the MFK Fisher Award for outstanding performance.

I moved to St. Louis where I worked the garde manger station at a local restaurant for six months or so before deciding to launch my own specialty bakery, AzucArte (a fusion of "azucar" and "arte," "sugar" and "art" in Spanish), which focused on plated desserts and, later, wedding cakes. I owned and operated that business for about seven years,

during which time I made thousands of custom-designed cakes, leading to national attention in nearly every bridal magazine. In 2007, I closed the shop to focus on freelance food writing, including cookbook writing, and food styling. Since then I've received a James Beard nomination for a food column I used to write, and my first book, "Cookie Swap," received three Cordon d' Or Culinary Academy Awards. I've also been inducted into Les Dames d' Escoffier International, and currently serve as President-Elect of the International Association of Culinary Professionals, the world's largest cross-disciplinary association serving those in the culinary profession.

I divide my time between St. Louis, Missouri, and Stonington, Maine, though I do most of my food writing and recipe testing in St. Louis. My husband and I also own and operate a 120-acre farm in Perryville, Missouri, called Three Spring Farms, where we raise grass-fed cattle, chickens, and turkeys. We spend many of our weekends there. I have two kitchens in Missouri: one (pictured in this article) is upstairs and serves as our everyday space, and one in the basement that is far more utilitarian (it houses much of my commercial bakery equipment from AzucArte), which I use primarily for recipe development and testing.



I love objects that convey a story or have a sense of history, so you'll find many repurposed and vintage bakery and cooking items in both kitchens. I have old flatware and dishes that I embedded into the concrete countertops; not only do they make handy coasters, but they also look great. I salvaged several soda fountain stools from an old general store in Arkansas, and salvaged commercial whisk attachments create a "chandelier" above my kitchen table. Vintage recipes are fitted behind a glass frame that I use to catch water under my dish rack, and my great grandmother's old recipes are shelved in their original loose-leaf binder alongside other vintage cookbooks.

At home when cooking for friends and family, I enjoy simple comfort foods that can be prepared with relative ease, mostly because I spend my workdays making things that require a high degree of concentration and I welcome a break from this routine. When I'm developing recipes or projects for my books, and when I was working in my bakery, my aim is to delight and inspire

— to create those "Aha!" taste and visual experiences that customers and readers can't get just anywhere. In order to achieve this, these recipes are quite involved or elaborate, and involve more unusual flavor and texture pairings. My decorative work is also very detailed. I firmly believe that God is in the details; people know you care when you've taken the time to add those special touches.

Signature Sugar Cookie Dough

Makes about 1 pound 6 ounces of dough, or 3–3½ dozen 2½-inch cookies

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1½ tsp. baking powder
- ¼ tsp. salt
- 6 TB. unsalted butter, softened
- ⅓ cup shortening
- ¾ cup granulated sugar
- 1 large egg
- 1 TB. whole milk
- ½ tsp. pure vanilla extract (or to taste)

1. Combine flour, baking powder, and salt in a small bowl; set aside for Step 4.
2. Using an electric mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, beat butter and shortening on medium speed until creamy. Gradually add sugar and beat until light and fluffy, about 1 minute. Do not over-beat, or cookies will dome when baking, making them more difficult to decorate later.
3. Whisk egg, milk, and vanilla extract together in another bowl. Add additional flavorings to taste. Slowly blend into butter mixture, mixing thoroughly on low to medium speed until smooth. Scrape down sides of bowl as needed to ensure even mixing.
4. Turn mixer to low speed and gradually add reserved dry ingredients, mixing just until incorporated. Flatten dough into a disk, wrap tightly in plastic, and refrigerate for about 3 hours, or until firm enough to roll without sticking.
5. Position rack in center of oven and preheat to 375 degrees. Line two cookie sheets with parchment paper (or silicone baking mats); set aside.
6. Roll dough on a lightly floured surface to a ⅛–⅜-³/₁₆-inch thickness. (Note: It's best to roll cookies no thicker than ⅜ inch in order to keep them flat for decorating.) Cut out assorted shapes with chosen cookie cutters. Carefully transfer cookies to prepared cookie sheets with an offset spatula, leaving no less than ¾ inch between each.
7. Baking time will vary considerably with cookie size and thickness. Bake until cookies are lightly browned around edges, about 8–10 minutes for 2½-inch-round cookies. Allow particularly long or delicately shaped cookies to cool 1–2 minutes on cookie sheets before transferring to wire racks. Otherwise, immediately transfer to racks and cool completely before frosting and/or assembling with royal icing, and storing.



When I'm cookie decorating or developing recipes, I really try to push the envelope, which means looking for inspiration outside of the traditional baking and pastry realm. I find inspiration in many things: color and texture combinations, nature, architecture, or other art forms. Keeping my creative edge sharp is a challenge. Desserts can't simply taste good and look gooey and decadent; to be noticed, they need to incorporate a genuine flavor or design surprise — and preferably more than one of both! I work extremely hard to keep my recipe and design ideas fresh.

In all circumstances, I believe food should taste as good as it looks, so I always focus on both the taste and aesthetics of what I produce. I can trace these beliefs back to my mom who was an ardent proponent of everything made from scratch, and who also introduced me to the fun and beauty of decorated cookies. As I stood on a stool in order to reach the countertops, my mom shared her passions for baking and decorating with me, and now I share my passions with others. Whether it is a tea and cookie party for my girlfriends (pictured in this article), through one of my books, or with a new recipe, I am so happy to be able to give people delicious and beautiful one-of-a-kind moments.





Royal Icing

Makes about 2 pounds 4 ounces, or 4½–5 cups. The volume will vary with egg size, egg temperature, and beating time.

- 2 lbs. powdered sugar
- ½ tsp. cream of tartar
- 5 large egg whites, cold (about 11–12 TB. pasteurized whites)
- Flavoring of choice, to taste
- Soft-gel food coloring of choice (optional)

1. Mix powdered sugar and cream of tartar together in bowl of an electric mixer. Stir in egg whites by hand to moisten sugar.
2. Fit electric mixer with a whip attachment. To avoid a flurry of powdered sugar, beat mixture on low speed just until egg whites are evenly incorporated. Scrape down sides of bowl; turn mixer to its highest speed and continue to beat about 2–3 minutes. (Icing will lighten and thicken as you beat; avoid beating too long or you'll introduce excess air bubbles, which interfere with smooth top-coating.) When done, icing should be bright white, glossy, and very thick; icing should cling to a spoon without falling off.
3. Beat in flavoring (don't skimp on flavoring, or icing will taste chalky) and/or coloring, as desired. Mix well before using, or store covered flush with plastic wrap.



Tip

Stamping is the ultimate cheater technique because you can create beautiful cookies without having any inherent artistic talent! Blot the food coloring on the inkpad (or stamp) before stamping for the cleanest imprint, and always stamp on a top-coated cookie with icing that is dry all the way through. Food-grade stamps can be found at sweetstampen.com.



Where Women Cook would like to thank Julia Usher for her involvement in our Winter Issue. Julia's books can be found on juliausher.com/store, and are available nationwide via Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and independent booksellers. Her cookie decorating instructional videos, produced in concert with coppergifts.com and designerstencils.com, are now available. Learn more at juliausher.com, and follow Julia on Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest.