

Scotch Cookies: Memories of a Family Recipe

By Ellen Power

When I was a child growing up in Newfoundland, the weeks leading up to Christmas were marked by a sudden disappearance of the kitchen counter. It was buried under layers and layers of Scotch cookies, each row nestled on its own sheet of parchment paper as the cookies waited to be iced.

Scotch cookies are the type of shortbread cookie that my Nova Scotia-born mother has baked every Christmas for as long as I can remember. (We joke sometimes that they're distinguishable from normal shortbread cookies because they're even richer and even worse for your health.) They look pretty unassuming: a creamy yellow circle with a dot of icing in the center and a speck of gumdrop on top. The circular shape is not necessary: my grandmother used to make them in all sorts of different shapes, according to my mother. But in all the years my grandmother mailed her Scotch cookies to us in the Christmas parcel, I don't remember them being anything other than circular. One year when I was in elementary school, my mother decided to cut her Scotch cookies out as tiny stars—but the sheer fussiness and the extra time involved for the new shape brought us back to circular cookies from then on. My mother has now inherited her mother's cookie cutters, and this year the family was very thrown off at the sight of diamond Scotch cookies in the cookie tin. It just seemed wrong!

We're not exactly sure when or how the Scotch cookie recipe came into the family. It's been around in my mother's family for at least two generations. My mother thinks it might have come from my great-aunt's in-laws, but that's mostly speculation. Regardless, in two generations those cookies have ingrained themselves in the Christmas traditions of my mother's generation and now mine. I couldn't imagine a Christmas where I didn't have a Scotch cookie or two for a (dubiously healthy) holiday breakfast all through the 12 days.

The Scotch cookie recipe itself doesn't seem particularly noteworthy at first glance. Like most shortbread cookies, the main ingredients in Scotch cookies are sugar, butter and enough flour and egg yolk to hold them together. [For an example, see: [Granny's Shortbread Cookies](#).] The secret lies in the flavoring. Unlike most shortbread, our Scotch cookies rely on three different extracts: vanilla, almond and lemon. We don't know if this is really the reason why our Scotch cookies are so addictive, but we do know that friends and family who've tried them once will slyly find a way to get their hands on some during every Christmas that follows. After the dough is assembled and left to rest, the cookies are cut out into one-two inch circles (depending on which cookie cutter we find first in the drawer) and baked until they just hint at being golden on the bottom. My mother complains that my grandmother always got this part perfect—Mom's, on the other hand, are apparently too brown on the bottom (she says she just doesn't have the patience for exact timing). I personally can't taste a difference, but I know my mother will keep trying for the Scotch cookie Holy Grail of brownness as long as she keeps baking them.

The last step is to affix the tiny piece of gumdrop to the top using a dab of icing. After that, they're ready to be packed up in round tins that go to relatives or friends' Christmas parties. The Scotch cookies for home are always the last to be done, since there are so many that need to be mailed to family first. When I was younger, my mother used to keep track in her personal cookbook of how many Scotch cookies she made a year. One awe-inspiring entry reads "16 dozen in a night!!" (her exclamation marks). My mother estimates that at peak production years, she was making up to 80 dozen each year. In the past few years, though, she's cut back on her usual cookie-making frenzy. My grandmother died in early December of 2010 and my mother flew home to Nova Scotia for the funeral. She arrived back just before Christmas, with no time to make any Scotch cookies other for than the household tin. After that Christmas, my mother announced that she was going to scale back production dramatically, in honour of my grandmother (who had always found the necessary Christmas preparations exhausting and stressful). Now the annual Scotch cookie count rests at a nice sensible 12 dozen. It's proven harder to break the habit that she imagined, though... the household tin has been overstocked for the past couple years.

I haven't tried my hand at Scotch cookies yet (other than lending a hand with icing). I figure that there's no rush in taking up the Scotch cookie mantle when I already have a nearby source for them. It's a different matter for my father's relatives who live in a small community in another part of the province. They were used to receiving a tin every year and so never bothered to ask for the recipe to bake for themselves. But they began to go into withdrawal when they stopped getting Scotch cookies after the great production cut-back. This year my mother and I were bombarded with Facebook messages asking for the recipe. It's not a family secret, but my mother still paused for a moment of reflection before she finally hit the "send" button that would post our Scotch cookie recipe on that community Facebook page and immortalize it on the internet. It was strange later on to see Facebook photos of Scotch cookies that weren't ours, lying in their creamy yellow rows on someone else's counter.

I was originally intending to include the Scotch cookie recipe here, but it seems like that my family might not be ready to send it out to a wider audience just yet. It has turned out to be harder than we thought to send this taste—so important to who our family is—out in the world on its own.