

Gardener's Holiday – Solstice Cookies

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Part 1: Heirloom Pizzelle

Most pizzelle baking irons are round, probably because it's much easier to get lace-edged circles than any kind of rectangle. But regardless of shape or perfection thereof, these crisp, light not-too-sweet cookies look great on the plate – while they last. Scroll down to skip straight to the recipe.

In the middle of the Northeastern winter, when gardening consists largely of spraying insecticidal soap and looking out the window at the naked spot where you meant to plant a chamaecyparis 'Filifera' but didn't, baking is a natural outlet for some of that thwarted creative energy, aka urge to potter around.

Said urge might be resistible if it weren't for the Pavlovian aspect, but just as springtime is full of cues to get out there with trowel and pruning shears, the Let's Banish Darkness season* is laden with near constant reminders that cookies should be made.

Some years we begin with gingerbread, adding the warm perfume of spices to old reliable butter + sugar + flour + oven = happiness; but we usually start with pizzelle, a family tradition from the Italian side of Bill, who arrived in my life equipped with his grandmother's pizzelle iron.

That would be grandmother Josephine, the world's greatest cook, born Giuseppa Cario in 1894, near Palermo, resident for most of her life in Washington, PA (near Pittsburgh).

The grandmotherly pizzelle iron IS iron, not the more modern cast aluminum. And it has both a very long handle and little feet, like the feet on old cast iron skillets, suggesting original design for use on an open hearth although they may simply be there to provide balance; the applied handle means the plates don't lie flat.

Most importantly, the iron has grandma's initials and those of grandpa Fidele engraved on one side. On the other is the date: 1931, the twentieth year of their marriage.



The personalized parts are not deeply cut, so they never show up as clearly as the patterns standard on the iron, but that just adds to the challenge. If the dough comes out just right, you can see ‘em. If it doesn’t, the pizzelle are still delicious and of course if you’ve gotten close enough to eat them, you don’t have to see the initials to know they’re there.

The basic batter is easy to make, and over the years I’ve tried many variations, some with vanilla, some with citrus rinds, some with crushed nuts and spices. Even chocolate, which is better than it sounds but not all that terrific unless you’re one of those people with a chocolate problem. Reception is always the same: Bill takes a bite and then says “My grandmother’s had anise in ‘em.”

E-bay is rich with vintage pizzelle irons, both stovetop and electric, but there are many modern versions, including several with non-stick coating (which is widely considered non-good). [Fante’s](#) in Philadelphia has a particularly broad selection, including a version of our family heirloom that you can engrave with YOUR initials and pass down to your grandchildren.

PIZZELLE

are ideally so thin they’re almost translucent, their intricate patterns picked out in the gold brown of perfect toast (middle top). But achieving this goal is not essential. Even when quite thick they’re still delicate, and tasty doneness can be anything from barely colored to almost burnt. In all of its manifestations homemade is so much better than commercial it’s like the difference between a twinkie and a Payard petit four.

What you’re making is basically a batch of extremely thin waffles and as with all waffles success is not instant; you generally have to discard the first couple. This was clearly no problem in former times; old fashioned recipes make 60 or more. This one yields far fewer, but it can be doubled effortlessly as long as you have a sturdy mixer.

For 18 to 24, depending on size:

2 large eggs, at room temperature

½ cup sugar

flavoring: either 1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla or the shredded rind of a lemon – or half orange – or about ¼ teaspoon anise oil (not anise extract) or for Bill a tablespoon of anise seeds

¼ pound butter, melted and cooled, plus more for the iron

1 heaping cup cake flour or 1 scant cup all purpose flour, plus a bit more if needed

1 teaspoon baking powder (use only 1 ½ teaspoons if doubling the recipe)

½ teaspoon salt

a pizzelle iron is a must; a pastry brush (for buttering the iron) and a knife with a long narrow point (for cookie prying) are nice but not essential. A small wire brush is a good cleaning tool for vintage iron baking irons. Otherwise, consult instructions that come with the gizmo.



1. Beat the eggs and sugar at medium speed until the mixture is thick and pale and falls from the beaters in a fat ribbon. While this is happening, melt the butter and thoroughly mix the cup of flour with the baking powder and salt.
 2. When the egg mixture is ready, beat in the flavoring, then slowly add the butter.
 3. Gently fold in the flour mixture by hand and set the batter aside, loosely covered, for 15 to 30 minutes.
 4. Heat the pizzelle iron on a medium flame until a drop of water sizzles vigorously, not quite dancing but almost. Brush the plates lightly with melted butter. (Many recipes suggest cooking spray, not my idea of fun but if you use it all the time you probably like it).
 5. Gently stir the batter/dough, which should be the texture of very stiff whipped cream. Add a bit more flour if it's softer but err on the light side; it's far easier to add more than try to compensate for too much. Put about a tablespoonful on the iron, spreading it out a bit as you deposit it. Slowly close the iron and use a table knife to remove anything that oozes out. Peek after about 30 seconds, the pizzelle should part from one side of the iron and the surface look dry. If it's dark brown turn down the heat. Reclose iron (and turn if on stovetop) and cook about 30 seconds more.
 6. Open iron, lift/pry off cookie and place on a cooling rack. If it's too thin, add a bit more flour. If it doesn't come off neatly, return iron to the heat to dry it out some more, then pry as necessary to clean the iron. Get the iron hotter and greasier next time; the pizzelle will tell you what it needs more succinctly than I can.
 7. Attempt to prevent your husband from eating them all immediately. They keep well for 10 days or so in an airtight tin.
- * The last time I addressed this subject I was in the throes of irritation at the people who are endlessly on about the [meaning of Christmas trees](#) and so neglected to mention things like Saturnalia and Hanukkah. Please consider them mentioned. That post also includes a recipe for shortbread, the world's easiest holiday cookie and one of the very best.



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