

# Maple rules at 2023 PG Holiday Cookie Challenge

## COOKIES, FROM E-1

father's side. Made with only five ingredients, including almond extract, the traditional Italian cookie was a winner for the Penn Hills resident in our Family Favorite category.

And cheers to **Jane Wright** of McCandless, who entered a homemade version of the caramel-filled bakery cookie she snuck from a wedding cookie table a decade ago. The winner in our Bar

category, the crispy shortbread filled with caramel and topped with Maldon sea salt flakes is as easy to make as it is sweetly satisfying.

### Call for entries

This year's contest featured four new categories, and drew a whopping 61 entries — nearly twice that of last year. Just as exciting was our first-ever community partner: Café Momentum Pittsburgh, a nationally recognized nonprofit restaur-

ant and professional training facility that gives teens who've been involved with the justice system a second chance with hands-on restaurant experience.

Adding to the "wow" factor was our first celebrity judge, WQED producer and Bethel Park native Rick Sebak, and some seriously stepped-up prizes. In addition to a check and apron from the Post-Gazette, the winner in each category received a gift certificate to the cafe from executive director Gene Walker, who was also a judge along with teenage intern Malakai.

The judging also moved from food editor Gretchen McKay's house last year to a blind taste-test in Café

Momentum's stylish dining room on Dec. 4.

What didn't change was the challenge's charitable focus. Understanding that many Pittsburghers take baking and sharing cookies during the holidays for granted, we made sure any leftovers would go to Café Momentum's favorite charitable organizations. And that they did after the final numbers were tallied at around 4 p.m., with hundreds of cookies boxed up for distribution to The Pittsburgh Project, Catholic Youth Association's Stephen Foster Community Center and Citipark's West Penn Recreation Center and

Healthy Active Living Senior Centers in Hazelwood and Morningside.

Cookies, made by PG staffers, were ranked on a 1-5 point scale for texture, taste and overall appeal.

As the overall Holiday Cookie Challenge Champion, Bacchus won \$150 from the PG and a \$150 gift certificate to Café Momentum. The other three category winners were awarded \$100 plus a \$100 Café Momentum gift certificate.

My kitchen, at least, was covered in flour and sugar after a weekend of intense baking that included an ill-timed power outage, and it also was hard work sampling and

judging all those cookies in front of the people who've made them time and again. But we're delighted with the sweet results, and are hoping at least a few of them will find their way into your recipe box or folder.

And if you've already got your favorites lined up? We might do a second story early next year on some of the cookies that didn't make the final cut but sound great and have interesting stories. Happy Holiday baking!

Gretchen McKay: [gmc-kay@post-gazette.com](mailto:gmc-kay@post-gazette.com), 412-263-1410 or on Twitter @g-mckay.

## WINNER: FAMILY FAVORITE

### AMARETTI

PG tested

Joyce Lynne Doyle struggled with making this chewy, almond-flavored cookie handed down from her paternal grandmother for years. It was only after finally sitting down with her mom, who made them for countless weddings, communions and Christmas, that she learned she wasn't beating the eggs stiff enough. Though her mother is gone now, "I am glad to have her cookie recipes to be able to continue to bake the traditional Italian cookies she lovingly made," the Penn Hills resident noted.

**6 egg whites (medium or large eggs)**

**1½ pounds sugar**  
**3 tablespoons almond extract**

**1½ pounds almonds (whole with skin, ground fine)**

**12 tablespoons flour**  
**1 pound pignoli nuts, optional**

**Preheat oven to 350 degrees.**

**Beat egg whites until they are very stiff (should be able**



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to turn the bowl over without them falling out). Gradually beat sugar into egg whites (¼ cup at a time). Add almond extract, ground almonds and flour. Dough should not be sticky.

**Roll** into balls approximately the size of a walnut. Press ball into pignoli nuts (optional) and place on parchment-lined cookie sheet.

**Bake** for 16-18 minutes. Slide parchment paper with baked cookies onto a wet towel. After about 5 minutes, cookies should easily come off the parchment.

**Place** on cooling racks until cool.

**Makes** about 7 dozen.

— Joyce Lynne Doyle, Penn Hills

*Tester's note: These were so easy to make. I'd recommend using a stand mixer to whip the egg whites (unless, of course, heavy whisking is your thing). Other than that, there isn't much to it, just gently folding the handful of ingredients. This recipe does make a heap of cookies and rolling them into little balls prior to baking is what takes the longest. Did not include the optional pine nuts, though I bet the cookies would be even better if they were included.*

## HOLIDAY COOKIE CHALLENGE CHAMPION

### MAPLE ICED MAPLE COOKIES

PG tested

Cookie contests can be splashy, so Sandy Bacchus wasn't sure this soft and fluffy maple cookie she makes in her mother's honor at Thanksgiving was worth entering.

"It's such a simple recipe, I thought it might not be special to other people," she says.

That said, the first time the Pine baker made them, "people went on and on." Fans included her mother, Carol, who loved all things maple and whose death two years ago still hurts. "When I make them, I think of her and that makes me feel good," Bacchus says. The special touch, she adds, "is the love you throw in at the end."

### For cookies

**1 cup unsalted butter softened**  
**2 cup granulated sugar**  
**3 eggs**  
**1 cup buttermilk**  
**½ teaspoon salt**  
**1 teaspoon vanilla**  
**2 teaspoons maple extract**  
**1 teaspoon baking soda**  
**1 teaspoon baking powder**  
**4½ cups all purpose flour, divided**

### For icing

**½ cup unsalted butter**  
**1 cup brown sugar**  
**¼ cup milk**  
**2 tablespoons maple syrup (add more for more maple flavor)**

**Pinch of salt**  
**2 cups powdered sugar**  
**Milk, if needed**  
**Preheat oven to 350 degrees.**

**In** a large mixing bowl with hand mixer, or in the bowl of a stand mixer, cream together butter and sugar until light and fluffy.

**Add** eggs, one at a time, mixing after each addition.

**With** the mixer on low, slowly pour in buttermilk and mix until combined.

**Add** salt, vanilla extract, maple extract, baking soda and baking powder and mix well.

**Add** half of the flour, mixing until combined, then add remaining flour and mix together.

**Drop** dough by 2 tablespoon scoops onto a parchment-lined baking sheet about 2 inches apart. Bake for 6-8 minutes. Cookies will be pale in color — do not over bake!

**Allow** cookies to cool a few minutes before transferring to a cooling rack to cool completely.

**Prepare** icing: In a saucepan over medium heat, melt butter and brown sugar. Bring to a boil for 2 minutes, whisking constantly.

**Add** milk, maple syrup, and salt and boil again for 1 minute while whisking.

**Turn** off heat and cool for 15 minutes, then add powdered sugar, whisking until it reaches a glue-like consistency. If too thick, add milk, 1 tablespoon at a time, until you get desired consistency.

**Quickly** dip cookies into icing and swirl to remove excess. The icing will thicken as it cools, just add more milk as needed to spread it easily over each cookie.

**Allow** icing to set up before storing in a covered container.

**Makes** 4 dozen cookies — Sandy Bacchus, Pine Township

*Tester's note: The scary part of this very easy and super-light cookie is believing they're actually done after just 8 minutes of baking; I had to obsessively check the bottoms to be sure. But wow, they're exactly what you think of when you think of a holiday cookie! I iced the cookies with a knife instead of dipping them because it was faster and less messy.*

## WINNER: CHOCOLATE

### BROWN BUTTER CHOCOLATE CHUNK COOKIES

PG tested

Devin O'Leary considers this recipe "my perfect chocolate chip cookie." Adding milk powder to the brown butter creates a deeper nutty flavor, and he also makes his own vanilla extracts. "It is chewy, dense and packed full of flavor," the Whitehall baker writes.

**8 ounces unsalted butter (2 sticks)**

**2 tablespoons of low-fat milk powder**

**1 standard ice cube (about 2 tablespoons)**

**11 ounces all-purpose flour**

**¾ teaspoon baking soda**

**2 teaspoons Diamond Crystal kosher salt or 1 teaspoon table salt**

**5 ounces granulated sugar (about ¾ cup; can do half vanilla sugar)**

**2 large eggs**

**2 teaspoons whiskey vanilla extract (regular vanilla extract is fine, too)**

**5 ounces dark brown sugar (about ½ tightly packed cup plus 2 tablespoons)**

**8 ounces semisweet chocolate, roughly chopped with a knife into ½- to ¾-inch chunks**

**Coarse sea salt, for garnish**

**Melt** butter in a medium saucepan over medium-high heat. Cook, gently swirling pan constantly, until milk solids begin to form.

**Add** in the milk powder and continue to heat until milk solids start to turn golden brown and butter smells nutty, about 5 minutes. Remove from heat and continue swirling the pan until the butter is a rich brown, about 15 seconds longer.

**Transfer** to a medium bowl, whisk in ice cube, transfer to refrigerator, and



Lucy Schaly/Post-Gazette

allow to cool completely, about 20 minutes, whisking occasionally. (Alternatively, whisk over an ice bath to hasten the process.)

**Whisk** together flour, baking soda and salt in a large bowl and set aside.

**Place** granulated sugar, eggs, and whiskey vanilla extract in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment. Whisk on medium-high speed until mixture is pale brownish-yellow and falls off the whisk in thick ribbons when lifted, about 5 minutes.

**When** brown butter mixture has cooled (it should be just starting to turn opaque again and firm around the edges, but still mostly liquid), add brown sugar and cooled brown butter to egg mixture in stand mixer. Mix on medium speed to combine, about 15 seconds.

**Fit** paddle attachment onto mixer. Add flour mixture and mix on low speed until just barely combined, with some dry flour still remaining, about 15 seconds. Add chocolate and mix on low speed until dough comes together, about 15 seconds longer. Transfer to an airtight container and refrigerate dough at least overnight and up to 3 days.

**When** ready to bake, add just oven racks to upper- and lower-middle positions and preheat oven to 350 degrees.

**Using** a 1-ounce ice cream scoop or a spoon, place scoops of cookie dough onto a nonstick or parchment-lined baking sheet. Each ball should measure approximately 3 tablespoons in volume, and you should be able to fit 6-8 balls on each sheet.

**Transfer** to oven and bake until golden brown around edges but still soft, about 12-13 minutes, rotating pans back to front and top to bottom halfway through baking.

**Remove** baking sheets from oven. While cookies are still hot, sprinkle lightly with coarser salt and gently press salt down to embed. Let cool for 2 minutes, then transfer cookies to a wire rack to cool completely.

**Makes** 2 dozen. — Devin O'Leary, Whitehall

*Tester's note: This is more of a passion project than a quick mix, as there are a lot of little steps to follow, as well as a recommended overnight resting period prior to baking. Nevertheless, it's a pretty fun recipe to make (though perhaps not best for a beginning baker). Even though it's complex, the recipe is easy to follow. The brown butter with added milk powder adds a nice depth of flavor and the addition of crunchy salt in the final step sends the flavor of a classic chocolate chip/chunk into a higher dimension.*

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