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FIRST PERSON

From Russia With Sweetness

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Butter, flour, vanilla, powdered sugar and chopped walnuts. Add to the mix my time, patience and delusions of grandeur as a pastry chef. Even I, a culinary flunky, can bake my way into dessert bliss with this surefire recipe.

International variations of my yummy cookie go by such aliases as Mexican Wedding Cakes, Italian Wedding Cakes, Swedish Tea Cakes, Austrian Kipferin, Spanish Polverones, Greek Kourabiedes, and just plain Butterballs or Snowballs in the United States. Given our Russian ancestry, my family has always called them "Russian Tea Cakes."

My mother, the quintessential balabusta, made them. For me, the kid born with a "sweet tooth," they were the uncontested favorite out of her vast array of home-baked goodies, even beating out her mandelbrot. I felt so grown-up and proud to carry on our family's Russian Tea Cake legacy when Mom later gave me the recipe. I still have the original index card, now dog-eared and smudged with cookie dough stains.

Over the years, the Russian Tea Cake has become my signature cookie, and, sad but true, the only offering in my baking repertoire. That being the case, I rarely share the recipe. If I decide to reveal it, and that's only upon special request, I have one stipulation: if the recipient and I are invited

to the same function for which baked goods are required, I get "first dibs" on baking the cookie.

I bake my Russian Tea Cakes for special occasions, such as select social gatherings, the High Holy Days and, of course, at Chanukah, when I bake them in bulk for friends, relatives, neighbors, colleagues at work, the gang at the deli who prepare my bagel each morning, and Claudio and Rudy at the pizzeria, who remind me all year, "Don't forget the cookies!"

Some years I bake over 250 Russian Tea's! For days, my small kitchen is transformed into a mini-bakery. My oven, usually dormant because of lack of use, gets its yearly workout, as do my hands and fingers. I spend hours mixing loose ingredients into dough, painstakingly rolling the dough into small smooth balls, lining up the balls in rows on a cookie sheet, sliding them with care into the oven, baking without burning them, and for my finale, rolling them in powdered sugar as if they were mini snowballs.

You might think this annual baking ritual a stressful enterprise. Au contraire. After all, isn't there something irresistible, not to mention innately calming, about the aroma of cookies baking in the oven? Whenever I pass a bakery in baking mode and breathe in, I experience a natural high. Hanging out in the comfort and warmth of my own home bakery, "up close and personal" with the source of the sweetness, is even more intoxicating. I always

like to think that my neighbors are inhaling in envy as they pass by my apartment.

The "hands-on" baking process I've embraced also nurtures my sense of well-being. I refuse to use a mixer or a fruit ball scooper like my friend uses to make her perfect cookie balls. I do it all manually, just like Mom and, I'm certain, the women in our Russian Jewish lineage used to do.

The repetitive movements of making the dough, molding the dough and rolling the balls in the powdered sugar, along with the mushy feel of the dough and softness of the sugar, have a tranquilizing effect on my psyche. No matter what is happening in my life, I am "in the moment" while baking my Russian Tea Cakes. I sometimes wonder if this labor of love brought the same joy and peace to my forebears, a respite, even though a fleeting one, from their life of persecution as Jews in Czarist Russia.

Through my Russian Tea Cakes, I feel connected to the family I never knew from the Old Country. However, in all honesty, I don't know the origin of Mom's recipe. Did she inherit it from a family member, receive it from a friend or copy it from a Betty Crocker cookbook? I never asked her. Perhaps I didn't want to lose my romantic notion that the Russian Tea Cakes were transported across the ocean, along with the borscht and stuffed cabbage.

In my mind's eye I can just see our family at home in their little shtetl in the Ukraine on a wintry day, with icicles out of "Dr. Zhivago" covering the window panes, sitting around the samovar, drinking tea out of a glass, munching on a Russian Tea Cake and talking about the possibility of coming to America. ■



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