

BAKING YOUR WAY THROUGH THE HOLIDAY SEASON WITH A COOKIE SWAP



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The winter holiday season brings a lot of amazing things with it. Cozy sweaters, giant feasts with hungry family and friends, and of course, some delicious sweet treats.

You could certainly bake all your favorite pies, cakes, and cookies that get you in the holiday mood, but why not make it into a fun, worthwhile activity that can be shared with others? Enter: the cookie swap. Also known as a cookie exchange, if you've never participated in one, think of it as a gift swap party with friends, but instead of having to shop for a gift that falls under a certain budget, you just get to bake dozens of delicious cookies for your friends to enjoy.

According to *Robin Olson*, author of *The Cookie Party Cookbook*, the history of the cookie exchange party goes back to the early 1800s. The concept isn't all that outlandish — we have been getting together with friends and family and preparing festive foods for centuries. The cookie swap, however, is a more nuanced event, and to really understand how to have a successful one as the host or simply as a guest, there are some steps you can take to ensure maximum swap success.

The Importance Of Planning Ahead

Just like preparing a large dinner around the holidays, a cookie swap requires planning. *Hetal Vasavada*, baker, author, and writer of the *Milk & Cardamom* cooking blog, has been participating in cookie swaps for years. Even for a seasoned baker like Vasavada, it's not something you can just wake up one morning and decide to do — there needs to be a plan in place.

"Make your cookie dough ahead so you aren't rushing to do everything in one day," said Vasavada. "I like to make my cookie dough 1-2 days in advance and then bake them off the day of the event. Also, be sure to let your cookies cool completely before your package them up to take to the cookie swap, otherwise they might get soggy or fall apart easily."

Lauren Jacobs of *@TheCheerfulBaker* fame on Instagram, is no stranger to the cookie swap, either. A little pre-planning is ideal for a successful swap, she notes, but it's about more than just the cookies themselves. If you're hosting, make sure to send out your invites a month in advance, with a follow up two weeks beforehand to confirm the guest count. Plus, having the right setup on the day-of is crucial. Tables for cookie platters, a small chalkboard to write each cookie name and baker, and extra bakery boxes for leftovers are just some of the ways to get your swap to be an orderly one.

"Without clear guidelines, guests can feel flustered or confused about quantities or setup. But with a bit of prep, everyone can enjoy a relaxed and festive event."

Quality Butter = Quality Cookies

You've sent out your invites, gotten all the decorations, and tables squared away for the swap. You've even prepared a festive holiday punch to serve to your guests! Now, it's time to get to the most important element of the cookie swap: the cookies. In the spirit of pre-planning, Jacobs recommends preparing half a dozen cookies per attendee, to ensure everyone gets some nice variety without feeling overwhelmed.

Before jumping into your favorite cookie recipe book, consider one of the most important ingredients you'll be working with during this process. Choosing a quality, worthwhile butter is a crucial step in the planning of your baked treats. You may not realize it, but butter is undoubtedly the workhorse in any cookie recipe that asks for it. In addition to that signature rich, creamy flavor it provides, butter also accounts for the texture, rise, and moisture. With the right butter in tow, your cookies will be tender, flavorful, and moist everytime.

In an effort to get consistent, reliable results every time, Vasavada uses Challenge Butter for her cookie creations.

"Good butter is key for a flavorful and delicious cookie," said Vasavada. "[Challenge] is made without artificial additives, so the flavor and texture are clean, making it the perfect base for cookies where that buttery warm flavor is key."





Get Creative With Your Recipes, But Keep It Simple

As you consider the cookies you want to bake for your swap, there are some points to keep in mind. Because of the large amount of cookies you'll be making, you're more likely to be successful choosing a simple recipe rather than breaking something out with complicated instructions and over-the-top assembly.

"I love baking snickerdoodles or shortbread cookies," said Vasavada. "They're both so simple to make, and you can easily add spices to them to make the flavors more unique." While your beautiful, delicate lattice cookies with detailed frosting are lovely, she recommends leaving them at home for your family, and opting for cookies that are easier to create and transport.

For Jacobs, seeing recipes that are passed down through the generations is always something to look forward to at her yearly cookie swaps.



"The most unique cookies I've seen often come from treasured family recipes passed down from grandmothers and great-grandmothers, those recipes always carry a special story and tradition that makes them truly stand out at the swap!"

- Lauren Jacobs

While there are plenty of traditional sweet cookie recipes to choose from, don't feel like you have to follow the norm. Just because you're not making something complicated doesn't mean you can't use different flavors for something unique and special. Not feeling unsalted butter this year? That's fine — salted butter can do just as good a job in your cookies, giving them a richer, saltier flavor.

"I love a good salty sweet cookie," said Vasavada. "Cookies that have heavy sweet components to them like caramel, milk chocolate, molasses, or peanut butter also do very well with salted butter as it helps balance out the flavors."

Put Your Baking To The Test With Challenge Butter

In partnership with Cookies for Kids' Cancer, Challenge Butter is donating \$10,000 to help fund pediatric cancer research, and hoping that bakers around the country will help raise awareness with their own holiday cookie creations. Between now and December 31, bakers need to tag **@challengebutter** and **@Cookies4kids** along with the hashtag **#ChallengeForACure** with photos showcasing holiday cookie recipes. Whether it's through a bake sale or a cookie swap, any way that people can raise awareness is a great way.

"We are thrilled to support this heartfelt initiative in partnership with Cookies for Kids' Cancer," said Priya Kumar, VP of Marketing at Challenge. "For decades, families across the country have trusted Challenge for their favorite holiday meals and traditions, and this year, we can't think of a better way to give back."

