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FOOD RECIPES

7 tips to making great gingerbread houses

Chef shares secrets you can use at home.

By Susan Dalzell
Contributing Writer

We've all seen them. The brightly packaged boxes in the grocery store, showing perfect little gingerbread houses, with white frosting roofs lined with straight rows of gum drops. Everything you need to assemble the house is inside. The promise of perfection, with minimum fuss.

But what if you'd like to try to make a gingerbread house from scratch? Sketch out your own design? Get you, maybe your kids, covered in flour? Fill the house with the spicy scent of baking gingerbread? Pick out – and generously sample – your own selection of brightly colored candies?

Chef Frank Leibold understands. As an associate professor of culinary arts at Sinclair Community College, Leibold has spent more than 20 years teaching students how to make gingerbread houses. His own gingerbread houses have won blue ribbons and gold medals in local and regional competitions.



Chef Frank Leibold suggests letting children take the lead when decorating gingerbread houses. CONTRIBUTED

And, yes, he's made many houses with his family.

"It's a fun tradition. When my kids were little, as a pastry chef myself, I worked hard to make everything exactly perfect," he said. "But, we really started having fun when I let the kids do the decorating on their own."

Leibold shared with us a few of his expert tips for making gingerbread houses.

Make a template: This is not the time to freestyle. Sketch your house design first, and then build a mock-up using lightweight cardboard. Better to learn now that your clock tower is top heavy than after you've spent hours baking and assembling it. For inspiration, Leibold said there are lots of resources online as well as in books at your local library.

Use the right recipe: "Gingerbread comes in three forms," Leibold warned. Steer clear of cake and cookie recipes. You want to use a recipe intended for structures, so the finished dough is dry and hard. We've got one of Leibold's favorites listed below. Bonus tip: Add cream of tartar to your frosting recipe. It will keep it white.

Create an aroma: "I always increase the spices that the recipe calls for," Leibold said. "That way, your finished house will have a nice smell when you come into the room, one that will last for the holidays."

Cut windows before assembling: After taking the gingerbread out of the oven, cut the windows out on the baking sheet. Leibold then spoons in crushed lifesavers and returns the bread to the oven for a couple of minutes. Or, instead of lifesavers, purchase pre-made sheets of gelatin. "You can see through it and sometimes they come with a little diamond pattern," Leibold said.

Make gravity your friend: "If you put your house up, then add candy and windows, it all wants to slide off," Leibold said. "Do it flat, then let it dry overnight. The next day, when you go to assemble it, the candy will all stay in place." Bonus tip: To hold the walls up when assembling, use cans as braces. Remove them once the frosting has dried.

Get creative: Decorating is the fun part. One of Leibold's favorite tricks? He uses sticks of gum, cut into fours, for shingles. "If you want to get fancy, head to a craft store and buy scissors that cut with patterns," he said. Another rooftop tip: "Take some icing and add a bit of water. The flowing icing looks like snow melting."

Embrace the Zen: After all that effort, the house isn't going to last forever. "What I like about these projects is that they aren't permanent," Leibold said. "They fall apart after the holidays. It's a memory that was. Each year, you get to start fresh."

CHEF LEIBOLD'S GINGERBREAD DOUGH

½ cup vegetable shortening
½ cup packed dark brown sugar
¼ cup light molasses
1 tablespoon cinnamon
1 tablespoon ground ginger
1½ teaspoons ground cloves
1½ teaspoon nutmeg
1 teaspoon baking soda

2 cups all-purpose flour
2–3 tablespoons water

In a large mixing bowl, cream the butter, brown sugar, molasses, cinnamon, ginger, cloves, nutmeg, and baking soda together until the mixture is smooth. Blend in the flour and water to make a stiff dough. Chill at least 30 minutes or until firm. Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

CHEF LEIBOLD'S ROYAL ICING

1 pound confectioners' sugar
3 large egg whites
½ teaspoon lemon juice or ¼ teaspoon cream of tartar

Place the confectioners' sugar (and cream of tartar if using) in the bowl of an electric mixer, add the egg whites and lemon juice (if using) and beat at medium speed until the sugar and eggs are completely mixed and the icing is thick and white.

Contact this contributing writer at susan.dalzell@gmail.com.