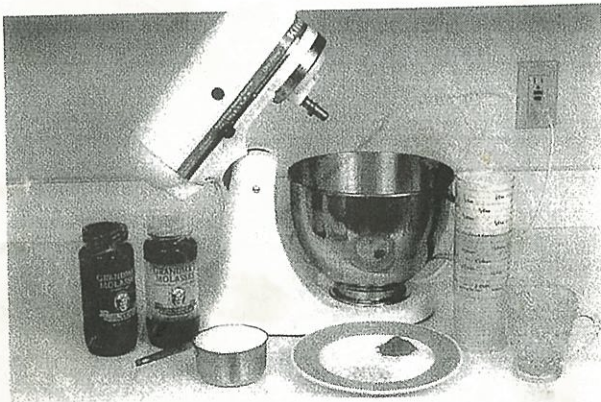


Gingerbread

After purchasing your materials and supplies, the first thing you must do is bake the gingerbread with a good, reliable recipe. I have tried many different ones in the decade that I have been baking gingerbread, and this is the best I've worked with. The pliable, easy-to-roll dough produces an extremely sturdy cookie that holds up well when assembled into a house. I also think it is quite delicious. Many people asked me throughout the course of writing this book if I was sick of gingerbread. I may have tired a bit of the royal icing that ended up everywhere (because it's basically just smooth, hard sugar), but I never tired of the gingerbread. Anytime I had leftover pieces, or the odd broken piece, I was secretly delighted. I did not gain weight while writing this book, but I did have to do a lot of extra mall walking!



TIP: Do not use a recipe that contains baking soda; the dough stays too soft.



Gingerbread ingredients can be found in almost every grocery store.



TIP: Always preheat the oven 10 to 15 minutes prior to baking the gingerbread.

Gingerbread Recipe

Yield: Approx. 6-1/2 cups dough (which will make most of the houses in this book)

- 1 cup good-quality all-vegetable shortening
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 cup unsulphered molasses (light or dark, the only difference is the shade of brown your gingerbread will be)
- 1 tsp. ground ginger
- 1 tsp. cinnamon
- 5 cups flour
- 4 Tbs. water

Mix the first seven ingredients on medium speed until well blended. Switch mixer to low speed and add flour and water; continue to mix until dough forms. Roll directly onto cookie sheets and cut pattern pieces. Bake 350 for 10 to 15 minutes.*

Rolling the Dough

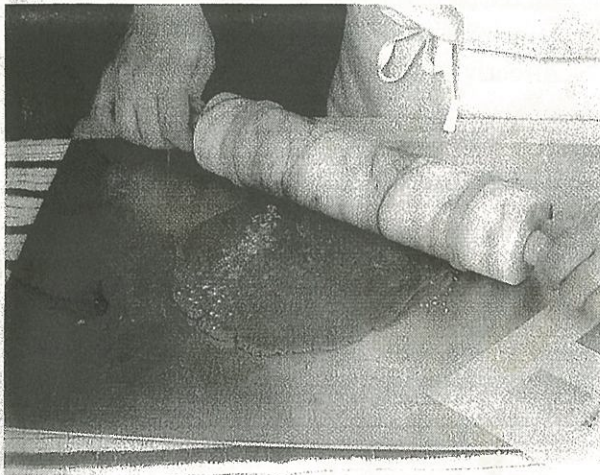
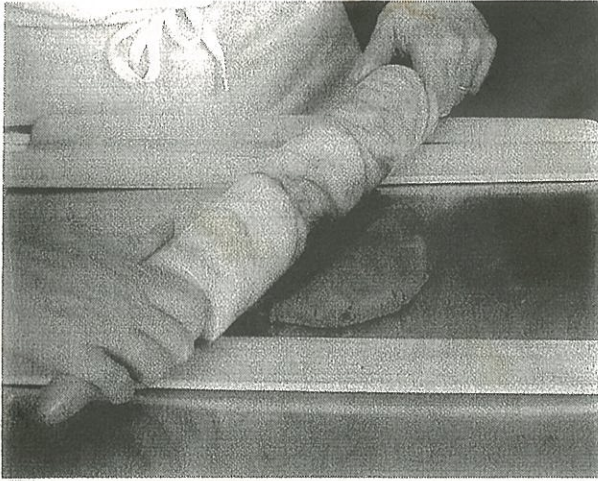
The less you move your gingerbread pieces, the more likely they are to retain shape. Therefore, roll the dough directly onto the pan, if possible. If the pan has sides, flip it over and roll the dough directly onto the back of the pan. It can be baked on the back of the pan as well; simply put it in the oven upside down.



TIP: To keep the pan from slipping when rolling out the dough, put it on a kitchen towel.

*This baking guideline is extremely tentative due to the wide variations in people's ovens. Very small pieces may have to be baked for only 5 to 7 minutes, while very large pieces may go 20 minutes or more. And insulated baking sheets, which produce beautiful, evenly browned gingerbread pieces, add even more time. The best thing I can tell you is to keep a close eye on your gingerbread, and when the sides begin to brown slightly, remove from the oven and cool, either on the pans or on wire racks. When cool, check the strength of the pieces. If they are not hard, crisp cookies, put them back on the pan and cook for additional time. (Note: You must wait until the pieces have cooled to check their strength, because they are always soft when warm.)

Another option is to roll the gingerbread out onto parchment paper, which can then be lifted onto the pan. This method works great, but parchment paper is expensive. Professional chefs use mats called Silpats, which work even better because they are heavy and do not slide around when the dough is being rolled out, but they are industrial in both size and price.



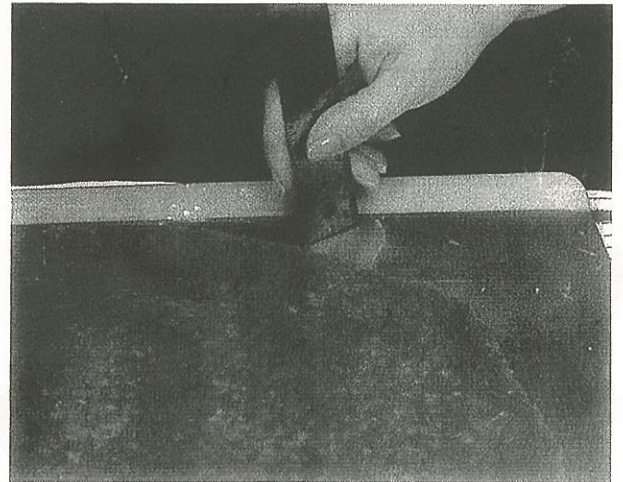
Wooden sticks (top) and rubber bands help to ensure even dough thickness.

Small non-supporting pieces of gingerbread should be approximately 1/4" thick. Larger supporting pieces should be about 3/8" thick. These desired thicknesses can be achieved in a variety of ways.

First, thick rubber bands, specially made for measuring dough, can be put on the ends of your rolling pin. They come in several sizes to lift the pin off of the dough to the desired height. For instance, a 3/8" rubber band will lift the pin enough to produce a 3/8" thick dough. Rolling pin rubber bands can be found at cake decorating stores or mail order companies (see Resources, pages 183-186).

The second way to produce an even thickness is to use two yardsticks (which are usually 1/4" to 3/8" thick) or other straight wooden sticks. (You can also use dowels, but they tend to roll a bit.) Place them on the sides of your dough and roll it flat. The yardsticks prevent the rolling pin from pressing the dough flatter than the desired height.

The most common method of measuring dough is by rolling it carefully while trying to apply even pressure on both ends of the rolling pin and then measuring the results with a ruler. If the dough comes out uneven, re-knead it and reroll.



Careful bakers sometimes measure dough with a ruler.

If the sides are close in thickness, place your pattern on the dough. If there is a great deal of variation, though, knead it up into a ball and reroll it. This flexible dough can be easily reworked.

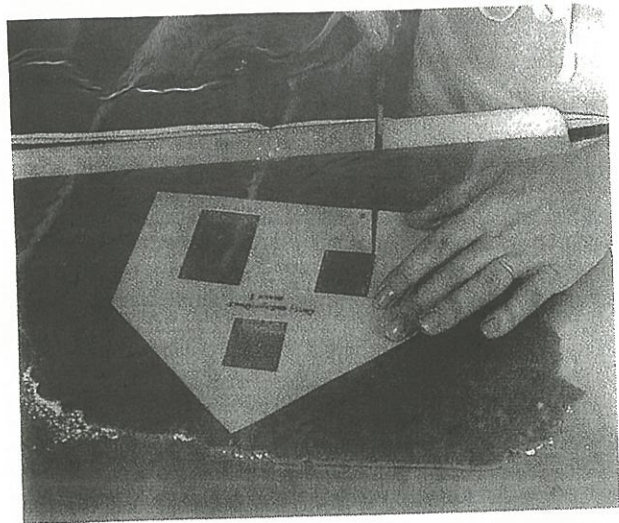


TIP: Reworking the dough too many times can cause air bubbles. If air bubbles do occur, pop them with a pin immediately after baking and press the cooked pieces down flat with an oven mitt.

If the dough sticks to your rolling pin, there are a number of things you can do:

- *Put a piece of plastic wrap or parchment paper over the dough*
- *Put a pastry cloth around the dough or over the rolling pin*
- *Freeze the rolling pin*
- *Microwave the dough for 30 seconds to soften it*
- *Lightly sprinkle flour onto the dough and even onto the rolling pin itself. (Note: You cannot do this with all gingerbread recipes. In some, the flour will show even after baking, but with this recipe it gets absorbed.)*

The methods I use most often are microwaving and flouring. I find that having a shaker full of flour at my elbow while I am rolling out gingerbread is almost a necessity.



Cut out windows and doors before trimming the sides.

When the dough has been rolled to your satisfaction, cut away the gingerbread with a sharp knife, working from the inside out. By that I mean, if there are any windows or doors in that pattern piece, cut them first. Then trim the sides. This cuts down on any distortion you might get in the pieces. Bake accordingly, cool, and check for hardness (strength). If soft, rebake for several minutes.



TIP: A good, sharp knife is extremely valuable in keeping the gingerbread edges neat.

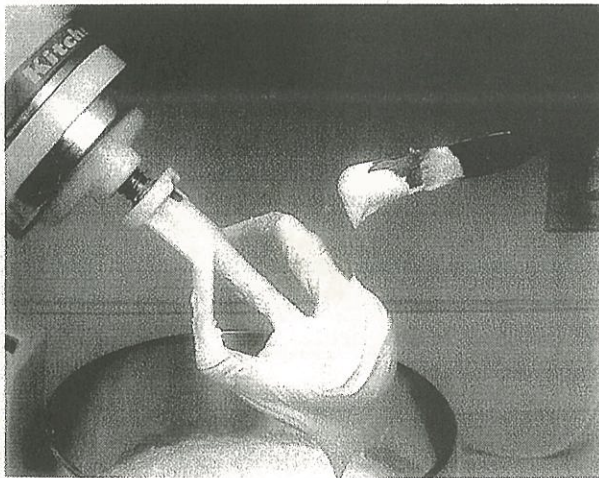
Baking the Gingerbread

In general, do not bake little gingerbread pieces with big ones. The little ones will burn while the big ones are still baking. For times and temperature, see the baking guidelines on page 16.

Royal Icing

The second essential element of a sturdy gingerbread house is a stiff royal icing. Consisting of powdered sugar, meringue powder, and water, it functions like cement to hold your house together. And, although I think the number one problem among beginning gingerbreaders is too runny an icing, it is a problem that is easily solved: simply beat the icing longer, perhaps adding a little more powdered sugar.

Royal icing can not be overbeaten. When you first begin mixing it, you will notice that it is a soft white, almost pale yellow color. It is also somewhat runny, like squeezable cheese. However, as you beat it longer you will notice it becoming whiter and stiffer. When you are finished, its consistency will be much closer to smooth peanut butter than to squeezable cheese.

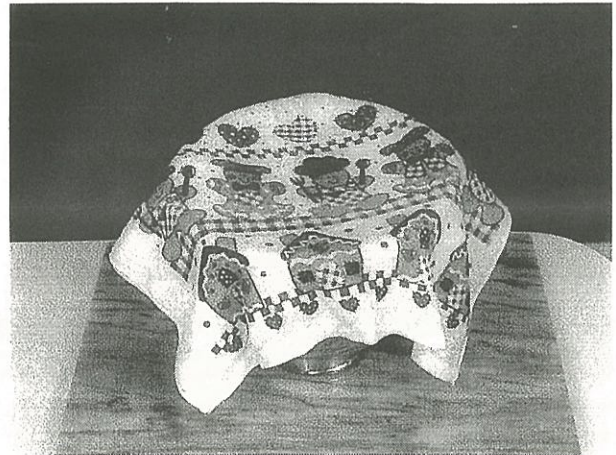


Royal icing is ready when it pulls up into stiff peaks.



TIP: Shortening- and/or butter-based icings are never acceptable substitutes for royal icing; they are simply too soft. (Royal icing dries hard.)

Pull the beaters out of the bowl, or test the icing with a knife. It should pull up into stiff peaks that do not sag. If the icing droops, beat for several more minutes. Remember that the icing cannot be overbeaten, but underbeating it could ruin your house.

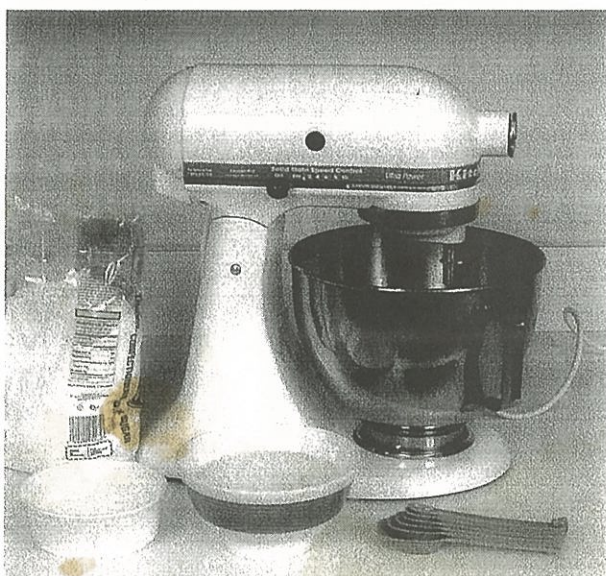


A damp towel over the bowl keeps royal icing from hardening.

It is also important to know that this icing crusts over quickly. Therefore, it is essential that your bowl be covered at all times by a tight-fitting lid or a damp towel when you are not directly loading your icing bag. Also, any time you set your icing bag down, the tip should rest in a damp paper towel so that the icing in the hole does not harden. If you forget and the icing in the tip does harden, use a toothpick to dig it out or run it under water for a few seconds to remoisten.

Quick Fact: Although ginger originated in Asia, most of the ginger we currently buy is grown in Jamaica.

In the past, egg whites were used instead of meringue powder (1 large egg white = 1 Tbs. meringue powder). However, salmonella concerns have prompted people to make the switch. Meringue powder is available at all cake decorating stores, as well as other stores that have large cake decorating sections, such as fabric and craft stores.



Only three ingredients are needed to make hard-drying royal icing: powdered sugar, meringue powder, and warm water.

Quick Fact: *In medieval Europe, gingerbread was an extremely popular item on holidays, market days, saints' days, and fairs. It was sold in pretty shapes and was often gilded and studded with spices. Little cookies called "fair buttons" or "fairings" were sold twenty for a penny.*

Royal Icing Recipe

2 lbs. confectioner's 10x powdered sugar
4 Tbs. meringue powder
10 to 12 Tbs. warm water

In a spotlessly clean, grease-free mixing bowl, combine the sugar and meringue powder. Add the water and beat until the icing forms stiff peaks (about 6 to 8 minutes with a heavy-duty mixer, 10 to 12 minutes with a hand-held mixer).

Keep the icing bowl covered with a damp cloth while it is being used and store it in an airtight container when it is not. (There is no need to refrigerate it.) Rebeat at a low speed, or stir very well with a spoon, before using again.

Note: For successful icing, keep all bowls and utensils completely grease free. Do not store leftover icing in margarine, butter, or vegetable oil spread tubs. Residual grease will break down the icing.



TIP: *When you double the royal icing recipe, do not automatically double the water. Use about two-thirds the amount at first, and if it's too dry, add more. For some reason, doubling the water can make it too runny at times, although at other times doubling the water is the right thing to do.*

Although you can use a knife to apply royal icing to your gingerbread pieces, I recommend the use of decorating bags. Available in plastic, disposable plastic, or parchment paper, they are easy to use and produce a consistently thick (or thin) bead of icing. Decorating bags can be used with just the end of the bag snipped off or they can be used with a cake decorating tip. If you use a coupler, you can change tips whenever you want without having to change decorating bags. Refer to the discussion of decorating bags on page 10 when deciding which ones to buy.

Although you can use a knife to carefully trim to your gingerbread pattern, the use of decorating bags is a plastic, disposable plastic or parchment paper that are easy to use and produce a consistent finish (or thin) band of icing. Decorating bags can be used with just the end of the tip cut off or they can be used with a cake decorating tip. If you use a coupler, you can change tips whenever you want without having to change decorating bags. Refer to the discussion of decorating bags on page 10 when deciding which ones to

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