

Cocktail Party Biscuits

Time: Thirty minutes to prepare, 15 minutes each to bake each sheet pan of biscuits.

Life in Charleston has always been one celebration after another. Charleston celebrates every season and every event (even death, perhaps especially death) with an extravagant spread of traditional foods—particularly sweets. A comparison of two cookbooks of the same era, circa 1820, richly demonstrates this fact: Mary Randolph's *Virginia Housewife* is a tour de force of continental and original American recipes composed from regional Virginia foods of the time; Sarah Rutledge's *Carolina Housewife* abbreviates both starter and main course foods and heads straight to the party: nearly half of this historic Carolina cookbook is desserts!

We were, thus, not surprised to discover that Charlestonians held frequent afternoon wine parties. By frequent we mean almost daily, and by wine we mean wines of extraordinary quality. The wines called for bright and tart fruits, robust cheeses, and a special pastry called *Charleston Wine Tasting Biscuits*.

Thus evolved a unique foodway. The biscuits were sturdy and crisp enough to support the burden of cheese, but delicate enough to step out of the way and allow the wines to get up on stage. We imagine these biscuits deftly spiced and infused with enough good wine to present a pleasant *frisson* of flavor.

And that is precisely what we have: red or white wine biscuits, finely textured with a touch of almond meal, sprinkled throughout with the tiniest trace of anise seeds, and baked crisp. They possess the affable, mild sweetness of a wheatmeal biscuit set against a subtle, lingering vinous finish. Their flavor is enhanced by, and they show themselves dramatically compatible with, any wine. We also like to consume them simply: one after another, back to back, like cookies.

Red wine grapes make slightly tastier biscuits, in our view. But white wine grapes make biscuits of a prettier hue.

Equipment Mise en Place

For this recipe you will need a digital scale, a food processor, a whisk, a rubber spatula, a rolling pin, parchment paper, and a couple of sheet pans.

Ingredients

2 ounces whole blanched almonds

Baking Notes

Exceptionally cooperative, this biscuit dough won't fight with the rolling pin when you roll it out, shrink when it bakes or do any other naughty things. The oil provides pliancy and, because oil—unlike butter—contains no water, we were able to add more liquid flavor in the form of wine.

And speaking of wines, you'd think the varietal wouldn't matter in a recipe like this. Not so. We made both red and white wine biscuits with an impressive assortment of wines, from port and Madeira to pinot gris and muscat. The finish of the biscuits varied substantially depending on what we chose. Ultimately, we came to favor big, young American wines for each of the two biscuits: cabernet sauvignon or zinfandel for the red, and a chardonnay or forward riesling for the white.

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1.50 to 1.75 ounces granulated sugar, plus additional for decoration, if desired

7 ounces Anson Mills Fine Cloth-Bolted Pastry Flour (1 ½ sifted cups)

½ teaspoon baking powder

½ teaspoon fine sea salt

1 teaspoon anise seeds, plus additional for decoration, if desired

⅓ cup cabernet sauvignon or zinfandel; or chardonnay

⅓ cup almond oil

Directions

1. Turn the almonds into the food processor and process to a very fine meal, 30 to 45 seconds. Pour the sugar through the tube and process an additional 10 or 15 seconds. Transfer the almond and sugar mixture to a large mixing bowl. Add the flour, baking powder, salt, and anise seed, and whisk well to combine. Make a well in the center of the bowl. Pour the wine and oil into the well and fold the liquid ingredients into the dry with a rubber spatula. The dough will come together very easily.

2. Divide the dough evenly into 2 pieces, about 7 ounces each. Roll one half out on a parchment sheet to a 16-inch thickness. (You won't need flour or a top sheet of parchment to roll it out.) Slide the parchment to a 12- by 15-inch sheet pan and put it in the refrigerator while you roll out the other half. Roll out and refrigerate the second piece of dough.

3. Adjust an oven rack to the upper middle position and heat the oven to 325 degrees. Remove one tray of dough from the refrigerator and stamp out as many 2 ¼-inch biscuits as possible. Use a toothpick or wooden skewer to lift the dough scraps out from in between the biscuits. Ball the scraps up and set them aside. Bake the first tray of biscuits until uniformly golden, about 15 minutes. While they are baking stamp biscuits from the second tray, and combine the scraps. Roll out the scraps, slide them onto a third parchment sheet, and refrigerate. Bake the remaining biscuits one tray at a time. Cool on a rack and store in a sealed plastic container or biscuit tin when completely cool. The biscuits will keep 4 or 5 days.

* Note: To make decorated holiday biscuits as we have here: press a second smaller cutter such as a snowflake into the center of each raw biscuit round; then press a circle into the center of that with a small, round pastry tip. Using the pastry tip as a funnel, trickle sugar through the tip, followed by a spray of anise seeds. Twist the pastry tip as you remove it and the decorations will stay perfectly in the center of the biscuit. Promise.

Makes 45 2 1/4-inch biscuits