

Babbo Natale and holiday biscotti

by Mary Ann Esposito



Biscotti are perfect for your holiday table and make delectable treats into the New Year and beyond. But, perhaps most importantly, they make a tasty snack for Santa Claus as he delivers presents to good boys and girls.

Babbo Natale is none other than Santa Claus to Italian children. But his real name is San Nicola Pastara di Licia, or Saint Nicholas. Born in Turkey during the third century A.D., he became the bishop of Myra in Asia Minor.

His association with gift-giving has many stories and a common one surrounds the legend of the three daughters of a poor man who became prostitutes in order to survive. Upon hearing this, San Nicola came to their house three times, and each time tossed a bag of gold coins through the window, providing an adequate dowry for each of the daughters to enter into an honorable marriage.

From this legend, it is said, comes the modern day Babbo Natale, Father Christmas, Saint Nicholas, or Santa Claus that children revere worldwide. The real veneration of San Nicola dates as far back as 1087 when his bones were stolen from Myra by sailors from Bari who were rescued in a horrific sea storm due to the intercession of the saint.

Since then his feast day is celebrated on

December 6, which also signals the start of the holiday baking season. Like American children, Italian children like to receive treats from

San Nicola, and in the past, left their shoes by the bed in hopes that the saint would leave torrone, coins, and oranges!

The best part is that from one basic dough recipe, an array of different biscotti can be made ahead of time without much effort; you can make almond biscotti, mixed dried fruit biscotti, white chocolate chunk, and chocolate and candied orange peel biscotti. But don't stop there, come up with your own special ingredients to add to the basic dough and have a stress-free biscotti baking good time. To make them extra-special, give them in clear cellophane bags tied with Christmas ribbon, or arrange them in gift boxes. And don't forget to leave a plate of biscotti for Babbo Natale. ➤



Biscotti di Natale Christmas Biscotti

Makes about 4 dozen

5 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into bits
 1 1/4 cups sugar
 6 large eggs
 3 1/4 cups unbleached all purpose flour
 3 1/4 teaspoons baking powder
 1/2 teaspoon salt
 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
 1 tablespoon brandy
 4 tablespoons cocoa
 1/2 cup diced dried fruit such as apricots,
 cherries, raisins or figs
 1/2 cup slivered almonds
 1/2 cup chopped white chocolate
 1/2 cup diced orange peel

Cream the butter and sugar in a stand mixer or in a bowl with a hand-held mixer until the mixture is smooth and fluffy. Beat in the eggs, one at a time, on medium speed.

On a sheet of wax paper, sift the flour, baking powder, and salt together. Add the flour mixture to the butter mixture and blend well on medium speed.

Remove half of the dough from the mixer to a bowl. On low speed, blend in the vanilla to the remaining dough in the mixer. Scoop the vanilla-flavored dough onto a sheet of wax paper. Set aside.

Return the remaining dough to the mixer and on low speed blend in the brandy and the cocoa until the dough is a uniform chocolate color. Scoop the dough out onto a second sheet of wax paper.

Place both the vanilla and chocolate dough, well-wrapped, in the refrigerator and allow them to chill overnight or for at least 3 to 4 hours to make it easier to handle.

Remove the vanilla-flavored dough from the wax paper and divide it in half. To one half,



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mix in 1/2 cup of diced, dried, mixed fruits such as apples, pears, apricots, raisins and cherries. To the second half, add 1/2 cup slivered almonds or hazelnuts.

Divide the chocolate dough in half. To one half add chopped white chocolate. To the second half add diced orange peel (or combination with grated orange peel).

Roll the dough on a lightly floured surface into ropes about 12 to 14 inches long and 1 1/2-inches wide.

Line baking sheets with parchment paper. Place two logs spaced 3 inches apart on each sheet.

Preheat the oven to 350 F.

Bake the logs for about 12-15 minutes or until they are firm to the touch. Allow the logs to cool for ten minutes before slicing them crosswise on the diagonal into 1/2-inch thick slices.

Place the biscotti back on the baking sheets and toast them in the oven for about 5 minutes, or until they lightly brown. Remove the biscotti to a rack to cool.

To glaze biscotti:

Bring 1 1/2 cups of water to a simmer in a double boiler. Turn off heat. Place 1/2 cup of coarsely chopped white chocolate and 1 teaspoon vegetable oil in a heat-proof bowl and place it in the top of the double boiler. Allow the chocolate to melt, then stir to blend the oil and chocolate. When smooth, dip the ends of biscotti in the chocolate, allowing the excess to drip off. Allow the biscotti to dry well on a cooling rack.