

Basler Brunzli (Heart-Shaped Chocolate Almond Spice Cookies)

Gourmet's New York restaurant critic devoted an entire column to great chocolate desserts, which shows how strongly the ingredient had captured the American imagination.

No wonder that when the renowned pastry chef and teacher Nick Malgieri wrote about his years cooking in Switzerland, he included these chocolate cookies among the Weihnachtsguetzli ("Christmas goodies"). With lots of spice and no flour, these bittersweet cookies showcase the chocolate, so use the best that you can find.

Makes about 5 dozen cookies

1 1/2 cups whole natural almonds (8 ounces)
1 1/2 cups sugar, plus additional for coating work surface
6 ounces Swiss or other fine-quality semisweet or bittersweet chocolate, chopped
1 1/2 teaspoons cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon ground cloves
1/4 cup egg whites (from about 2 large eggs)

In a food processor, combine almonds with 1 1/2 cups sugar and pulse until ground fine (do not overprocess, or mixture will become warm and melt chocolate when added). Add chocolate and pulse until ground fine. Add spices and pulse twice. Add whites and pulse until mixture forms a stiff dough, adding 1 teaspoon water if necessary.

Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper or foil.

On a surface coated with additional sugar, press out or roll dough about 1/4 inch thick. With bottom of fork held facing down and tines touching dough at 60-degree angle, score dough about 1/16 inch deep by pulling fork across in a series of parallel vertical lines. With a 2-inch heart-, star-, and/or clover-leaf-shaped cutter, cut out cookies and transfer to prepared baking sheets. Press dough scraps together and cut out more cookies in same manner. Let cookies stand, uncovered, at room temperature 3 hours.

Preheat oven to 325°F.

Put cookies in oven and immediately reduce temperature to 300°F. Bake cookies, switching position of sheets in oven halfway through baking, 10 to 15 minutes, or until they are just firm (do not overbake, or cookies will be hard), and cool on sheets on racks. Keep cookies in an airtight container up to 2 weeks.

Recipe Note

The dough is sticky, so roll it out between sheets of parchment or wax paper, sprinkling the bottom sheet with sugar. Then remove the top sheet, cut out the cookies, and peel them right off the paper.