

Kolacky

Talk about jumbled roots: This tender pastry cookie, a cousin to Jewish rugelach, has Polish origins. Adding cream cheese to the dough is an American twist, thanks to a 1930s marketing push from Kraft in Chicago. Shauna's jewel-like apricot filling nods to Hungary. And as for *koh-LAH-key* or *koh-LAHTCH-key*? Shauna says it depends whose grandma you ask.



ROLLED SHAPED SUGARED BAKED

WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE TO TELL OUR REGION'S STORY THROUGH CHRISTMAS COOKIES? THE AUTHOR OF A NEW COOKBOOK CELEBRATING THE MIDWEST'S BAKING HERITAGE FINDS OUT.

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When food writer Shauna Sever moved her family from California to Chicago in 2015, she landed at O'Hare with an urge to bake. Not to whip up muffins, but to *bake*, with the hunger and heart of someone chasing her roots. So she made her grandmother's sugar cookies for Christmas. "When my kids grabbed two at a time from the tin, thinking no one saw them, just as I had at their ages, it sent me straight to the Kleenex zone," she recalls. "I was home, with my people, our food, our traditions—and so much more to learn with new eyes as a baker, writer, mother and human."

That moment sparked *Midwest Made: Big, Bold Baking from the Heartland*, Shauna's most personal cookbook yet (Running Press, \$30). For two years, she traveled to small-town bakeries and pored over newspaper clippings, church recipe collections and community cookbooks. Then she hit the kitchen and perfected 125 new (or, blessedly, not new at all) recipes for pies, Bundts, bars and more. If she learned one thing from the endeavor, she says, it's this: "Without immigrants, our unique culinary landscape simply wouldn't exist. One glance at a Midwesterner's holiday cookie tin tells all you need to know."

Challenge accepted. On the following pages, you'll find Shauna's takes on Mexican polvorones, German lebkuchen and Norwegian sandbakkels, plus born-in-the-USA staples like fudge and peanut blossoms. These treats are old souls, timeless and true. You'll probably find one or two that you or your neighbor already bake. And that's exactly the point.

FOOD STYLING: CHARLES WORTHINGTON



For recipes, see page 99.



Lebkuchen

You'll want to summon the faith and determination of a homesteading pioneer before baking this German staple. The dough requires a two-day rest for the flavors of lemon, cinnamon, ginger, allspice, nutmeg and cloves to ripen. After cutting, baking and icing, Shauna warns, "they'll come out awfully similar to a Milk-Bone, and you'll wonder what the heck is going on." That's when you give the lebkuchen some quiet time in Tupperware with a wedge of apple. The payoff? A toothsome texture and deep spiciness that warms you from the tummy out.

Glaze lebkuchen in translucent icing, or dip them in white or dark chocolate.



Cheater's Fudge

Old-fashioned fudge (the kind made on marble slabs behind candy-shop windows on Michigan's Mackinac Island) requires a candy thermometer and a whole lot of patience. Shauna prefers a shortcut version you might recognize from the back of cans of sweetened condensed milk, but she gives it a 21st-century boost of bittersweet chocolate and flaky sea salt.

"Exchanging recipes with a Midwesterner is a bit like playing therapist—deeply buried memories are revealed, and everyone takes home extra reading material."



Cracker Toffee

Shauna describes this kitschy, candy-like classic as “the unicorn of the cookie tin.” Irresistible (sweet and salty never fails). Elusive (because it always disappears before anything else). And mysterious (many people don’t realize there are saltine crackers involved). “And it’s sturdy,” she adds, “so you can pack it into cellophane packages for a perfect hostess gift.”



Gramma’s Sugar Cookies

“I grew up thinking this most beloved recipe was special to my family. And in turn that we were geniuses because no one else knew about it, with its unique additions of vegetable oil, confectioners’ sugar and cream of tartar,” Shauna writes of these crisp, buttery rounds. “Imagine my bewilderment when I found this exact recipe in a vintage Illinois state cookbook, titled Mary Todd Lincoln’s Sugar Cookies.” So, Gramma had great taste.

Anisette Buttons

Shauna remembers visiting Italian bakeries as a kid to buy tiny cookies by the pound. Pink ones. Nutty ones. Round ones. Scalloped ones. The thrill was in the volume. And that’s the story with these soft, iced morsels. “Anisettes feel so Italian because it’s about abundance,” Shauna muses. “Small bites, but a huge yield, to get you through all the coffees you’ve got to have.”



If you aren't fond of anise's licorice flavor, make these cookies with lemon extract instead.

Polvorones

Ask an American to share a favorite brownie recipe, and you’ll get 14 different versions. The same is true of polvorones, Mexico’s crispy, airy answer to shortbread (you may know them as Mexican wedding cookies). Some have finely chopped nuts in the dough. Some are crescent-shape. Some are tinted with food coloring. Shauna’s spin: coating them in cinnamon sugar for a churro-like effect.



Sandbakkels

"I'm a sucker for the kind of holiday baking that requires a bit of shaping and care," Shauna says. "A tradition that calls people to a table to share the work, gabbing all the while." Enter these buttery Norwegian gems. The name means "sand tarts" because the cookies (which, flipped over, can double as tiny shells to hold cream and fruit) have such a fine, crisp texture.

Look for sets of fluted tins in thrift stores or order them online.

For recipes, see page 99.

"In the Midwest, our love of baking is real, and it's deep. We believe in No Carb Left Behind."



Peanut Better Blossoms

Risking the wrath of Midwesterners everywhere, Shauna admits that peanut butter blossoms often leave her cold: not enough PB flavor, and the chocolate comes off in one hunk. So she ramped up the nuttiness and ditched the candy kiss (gasp!) for a dollop of creamy ganache. A new classic? We think so—but check back in a generation. [MWL](#)



HOW-TO VIDEO

Hover your phone's camera here to watch Shauna making Peanut Better Blossoms.