

Belgian Spice Cookies (Speculoos)

Passengers can't get enough of Delta Air Lines' in-flight snack of Biscoff, the commercial version of this Belgian confection. We took it to even greater heights.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

There is a story floating around the internet about a grandmother who gobbled up her grandson's cookies as he slept beside her during a long flight. The motive for the 30,000-foot crime? Biscoff, the signature onboard snack of Delta Air Lines. The tempting cookie dates to 1932, when a Belgian bakery started selling *speculoos*. Fifty years later, the bakery began manufacturing speculoos for Americans under the name "Biscoff" and its popularity soared (see "How Biscoff Took Off").

The enthusiasm is understandable: Speculoos boast warm spice notes, nuanced caramel flavor, and a crisp, open texture that crumbles easily (the term of art here is "friable"). Imagine something between a delicate graham cracker and a hard gingersnap that nearly melts in your mouth.

I wanted to use the one-of-a-kind texture of Biscoff as a model for homemade speculoos. I also intended to mimic their caramel taste and improve the spice flavor—one place I found the packaged version lacking.

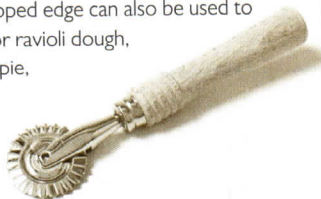
Speculoos Speculations

Speculoos recipes don't typically call for unusual ingredients or techniques: Simply cream sugar and softened butter in a stand mixer, add an egg (or not), and then mix in flour, spices, baking soda, and salt. Traditional recipes call for pressing the dough into shallow molds that serve the dual purpose of leaving a decorative imprint on the cookies and keeping them from spreading. I'd definitely be taking the more streamlined, modern route of simply rolling the dough thin so

Get a Decorative Edge

The fluted pastry wheel that we use to give our *speculoos* a scalloped edge can also be used to cut fresh pasta or ravioli dough,

lattice strips for pie, cracker dough, or dough for turnovers, empanadas, or other filled pastries.



FLUTED PASTRY WHEEL



Small amounts of cardamom and cloves boost the sweet spiciness of the 5 teaspoons of cinnamon in our *speculoos*.

the cookies could bake up dry and crisp.

None of the recipes I tried produced the right texture, so I set out to establish my own. Since the dough would be rolled thin, I wouldn't need a lot of volume, so I started with just 1½ cups of flour. Most speculoos recipes call for roughly half as much butter as flour by weight, and sure enough, this made the cookies appropriately crumbly; any more butter made them too fragile. I kept the sugar in check so as to avoid the slight oversweetness of packaged Biscoff, and this also got me closer to a friable texture. That's because sugar is hygroscopic, meaning that it holds on to water, which creates chewiness in cookies. In the end, I landed on 1½ cups of flour, 8 tablespoons of butter, just ¾ cup of brown sugar, and 1 egg, which bound the dough without adding a lot of extra moisture.

As for the leavener, I started with ¼ teaspoon of baking soda, which didn't do much to enhance the crisp, open texture since it requires acid to

Try *speculoos* crumbled onto yogurt, ice cream, or pudding or ground to make a cookie-crumb pie crust.

react—and these cookies had only the slight acidity of brown sugar. Switching to baking powder successfully opened the internal structure (see "Producing the Distinctive Texture [and Taste] of Speculoos"). However, without the baking soda, the cookies lacked a certain savoriness, so I added it back in.

With the crumb of my speculoos just right, I investigated the sugar flavor. Most American speculoos recipes call for brown sugar, which is made by combining refined white sugar with molasses. But authentic speculoos are sweetened with Belgian brown sugar, which is made by adding caramelized sugar to refined white sugar, so it has a cleaner taste, with none of the bitterness of molasses. The one American speculoos recipe I found that acknowledged this difference was from Stella Parks, author of *BraveTart* (2017). She calls for toasting white sugar in the oven for 5 hours, which produced appealing, mild flavor but effort-wise was (quite literally) beyond the pale.

Turbinado sugar was a more efficient solution since it has the appropriate caramel-like notes (see "Sourcing Clean Caramel Flavor") straight from the bag. But turbinado crystals are larger than those of other sugars, so it gave the speculoos an underlying grittiness. My fix was to grind the turbinado in the food processor. With that, the cookies had the right honeycomb texture along with caramel undertones.

Now, how to nail the spice flavor? Speculoos recipes vary widely in their spice choices, but Biscoff contain only cinnamon. I followed that model, landing on a sizable 5 teaspoons. But something was missing. After some experimenting, I found that 1 teaspoon of cardamom and ¼ teaspoon of cloves made the cinnamon sing with warmth and sweetness without calling attention to themselves.

The Final Approach

To finish, I used a technique from our Easy Holiday Sugar Cookies recipe (November/December 2017): I rolled the just-mixed dough between sheets of parchment and then chilled it before cutting and baking. This was easier than having to either roll and cut a soft dough straightaway

Producing the Distinctive Texture (and Taste) of Speculoos

In baking, the term “crumb” is used to describe the internal structure of bread or cake. But cookies have a crumb, too. To achieve the proper friable (crisp, airy) crumb in our *speculoos*, we roll the dough thin so it can dry and crisp in the oven. And since sugar is hygroscopic (meaning that it holds on to water and makes cookies chewy), we use only enough to lightly sweeten the dough. Finally, we add both baking powder and baking soda. Baking powder reacts first when it gets wet and again when it is heated: just ¼ teaspoon effectively puffed the dough, creating numerous big holes. Baking soda, on the other hand, provides lift when it reacts with acid. Our *speculoos* dough contains only a tiny bit of acid in the sugar, but it still made sense to include soda: It raised the dough’s pH to promote browning reactions and gave the cookies a subtle toasty/savory quality that we missed when we left it out.



CRISP, AIRY,
CRUMBLY

or wait for a disk of dough to chill to a workable consistency. After rolling the dough thin— $\frac{3}{8}$ inch was just right—I copied Biscoff’s scalloped edges by using a fluted pastry wheel to cut it into rectangles. Finally, I gently baked the cookies in a 300-degree oven, which gave them ample time to thoroughly dry and crisp.

I had one more thought: Since I already had the food processor out to grind the turbinado, could I also use it to prepare the dough? Doing so would mean I wouldn’t need to wait for the butter to soften since the processor’s sharp blades can handle cold butter. To find out, I prepared the recipe in a stand mixer and in a food processor. Happily, the resulting cookies were identical; I would stick with the food processor.

With that, there was just one thing left to do: Step across the border to Holland, where *speculoos* are stamped with windmills and have almonds baked into the underside. I wasn’t about to carve miniature windmills, but it was easy to roll sliced almonds into the bottom of my dough. With or without nuts, one thing was for certain: These *speculoos* were top-flight.

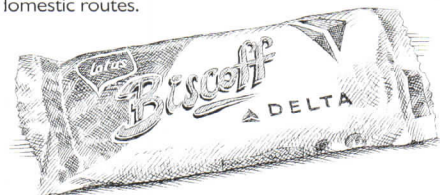
BELGIAN SPICE COOKIES (SPECULOOS)

MAKES 32 COOKIES

For the proper flavor, we strongly recommend using turbinado sugar (commonly sold as Sugar in the Raw). If you can’t find it, use $\frac{3}{4}$ cup plus 2 tablespoons (6 ounces) of packed light brown sugar and skip the sugar grinding in step 2. In step 3, use a rolling pin and a combination of rolling and a smearing motion

How Biscoff Took Off

In 1986, Lotus, a Belgian bakery, began selling *speculoos* under the name Biscoff (so-called because the biscuits, or cookies, pair well with coffee) to Delta Air Lines to offer to their passengers on flights. Today, Delta serves roughly 30 million individual packages of the cookies annually on domestic routes.



to form the rectangle. If the dough spreads beyond the rectangle, trim it and use the scraps to fill in the corners; then, replace the parchment and continue to roll. Do not use cookie molds or an embossed rolling pin for the *speculoos*; they will not hold decorations.

- 1½ cups (7½ ounces) all-purpose flour
- 5 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon ground cardamom
- ¼ teaspoon ground cloves
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- ¼ teaspoon baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (6 ounces) turbinado sugar
- 8 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch pieces and chilled
- 1 large egg

1. Whisk flour, cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, baking soda, baking powder, and salt together in bowl. Using pencil and ruler, draw 10 by 12-inch rectangle in center of each of 2 large sheets of parchment paper, crisscrossing lines at corners. (Use crisscrosses to help line up top and bottom sheets as dough is rolled.)

2. Process sugar in food processor for 30 seconds (some grains will be smaller than granulated sugar; others will be larger). Add butter and process until uniform mass forms and no large pieces of butter are visible, about 30 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Add egg and process until smooth and paste-like, about 10 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Add flour mixture and process until no dry flour remains but mixture remains crumbly, about 30 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed.

3. Transfer dough to bowl and knead gently with spatula until uniform and smooth, about 10 seconds. Place 1 piece of parchment on counter with pencil side facing down (you should be able to see rectangle through paper). Place dough in center of marked rectangle and press into 6 by 9-inch rectangle. Place second sheet of parchment over dough, with pencil side facing up, so dough is in center of marked rectangle. Using pencil marks as guide, use rolling pin and bench scraper to shape dough into 10 by 12-inch rectangle of even $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch thickness. Transfer dough

with parchment to rimmed baking sheet. Refrigerate until dough is firm, at least 1½ hours (or freeze for 30 minutes). (Rolled dough can be wrapped in plastic wrap and refrigerated for up to 5 days.)

4. Adjust oven racks to upper-middle and lower-middle positions and heat oven to 300 degrees. Line 2 rimless baking sheets with parchment. Transfer chilled dough to counter. Gently peel off top layer of parchment from dough. Using fluted pastry wheel (or sharp knife or pizza cutter) and ruler, trim off rounded edges of dough that extend over marked edges of 10 by 12-inch rectangle. Cut dough lengthwise into 8 equal strips about $\frac{1}{4}$ inches wide. Cut each strip crosswise into 4 equal pieces about 3 inches long. Transfer cookies to prepared sheets, spacing them at least ½ inch apart. Bake until cookies are lightly and evenly browned, 30 to 32 minutes, switching and rotating sheets halfway through baking. Let cookies cool completely on sheets, about 20 minutes. (Cookies can be stored at room temperature for up to 3 weeks.)

BELGIAN SPICE COOKIES (SPECULOOS) WITH ALMONDS

Once dough has been rolled into rectangle in step 3, gently peel off top layer of parchment. Sprinkle ½ cup sliced almonds evenly over dough. Using rolling pin, gently press almonds into dough. Return parchment to dough, flip dough over, and transfer with parchment to sheet. Proceed with recipe as directed.

Sourcing Clean Caramel Flavor

Authentic *speculoos* are made from Belgian brown sugar, a blend of refined white sugar and caramelized sugar. American brown sugar, which is typically made by mixing refined white sugar with molasses (the syrup left over when cane juice is boiled down to make sugar), is the usual substitute. The amount of molasses in brown sugar isn’t appropriate for *speculoos*. Instead, we call for turbinado sugar. It’s produced by evaporating sugar cane juice to leave behind sugar crystals containing a very small amount of molasses residue, which results in a clean, light caramel flavor.



BELGIAN BROWN
SUGAR

TURBINADO
SUGAR

Fill Your Cookie Jar

A step-by-step video is available at CooksofIllustrated.com/oct18

