

PAIN DE GÊNES BUTTONS

See the words *pain de Gênes*, and know that almonds will abound. The cake — never mind that *pain* means “bread” in French — as glorious as it is, commemorates a moment of strife, the 1800 siege of Gênes, or Genoa, when people had to survive on almonds. Eventually the French, under Napoleon’s troops, took Genoa from the Austrians, and while neither situation was probably great for the Italians, we’ve got this recipe, which is usually turned into a round cake or a loaf. Here the batter, baked in mini-muffin tins, makes buttons, small and cute and full of flavor. These are soft, chewy cookies with a texture that’s a cross between a sponge and a pound cake. And there’s a burst of almond flavor in each bite.

The cookies require a lot of mixing but, if you stop short, you won’t get the right texture. Also, check your almond paste before you start. It should be soft and malleable with a texture that tempts you to play with it.

The traditional flavoring for a pain de Gênes is kirsch, but you can use rum, Grand Marnier or vanilla extract. I like to scatter some sliced almonds in the bottom of the muffin tin and then serve the buttons almond side up — optional but nice. As plain as these are, they’re quite powerful — don’t underestimate them.

Makes 24 cookies

Sliced almonds, for the pan (optional)

2 tablespoons all-purpose flour

1 tablespoon cornstarch

Pinch of fine sea salt

7 ounces (200 grams) soft, pliable almond paste (such as Solo or Odense)

2 large eggs, at room temperature

½ stick (4 tablespoons; 2 ounces; 57 grams) unsalted butter, melted and cooled

1 tablespoon kirsch, dark rum or Grand Marnier or 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract

Center a rack in the oven and preheat it to 350 degrees F. Butter or spray two 12-cup or one 24-cup mini-muffin tin(s). If you’d like, scatter a few sliced almonds in the base of each little cup.

Whisk together the flour, cornstarch and salt.

Working with a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, or in a bowl with a hand mixer, beat the almond paste and one of the eggs together on medium speed for 5 minutes. Scrape down the bowl. If you’re working with a stand mixer, replace the paddle with the whisk attachment. Turn the mixer to medium speed, add the second egg and beat until incorporated. Turn the mixer up to high and beat for

5 minutes more, scraping down the bowl as needed. You'll have a creamy mixture, rather like mayonnaise. Stir a few spoonfuls of the batter into the cooled butter (this will make it easier to incorporate the butter when needed).

Working on low speed, beat in the kirsch, other alcohol or vanilla, followed by the dry ingredients. Stop as soon as the flour disappears into the batter. Switch to a flexible spatula and fold in the butter mixture. Divide the batter evenly among the mini-muffin tins.

Bake the buttons for 11 to 13 minutes, or until the cookies are puffed, lightly golden and spring back when gently pressed. A tester inserted into the center of a button should come out clean. Unmold the cookies — if there are a few stragglers, rap the muffin tin against the counter and they'll tumble out — and place them almond side up on racks to cool until just warm or room temperature.

STORING

The buttons will keep in a covered container at room temperature for up to 3 days, but their texture is best the day they are made. Packed airtight, they can be frozen for up to 2 months.

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