

Making Wochies

I'm not Italian but I play one in my kitchen.

Every year, Christmas at my husband's family's house was celebrated with a feast of food, followed by the obligatory overflowing home-made cookie tray.

The centerpiece of the tray was fig-filled cookies in assorted crescent and roll shapes with sugar icing and colored ball sprinkles.

The family called them "woochies," short for "woochie-dadas." No one made these better than my mother-in-law Nina, with invaluable help from my father-in-law. Nina made hundreds of these cookies, shared them with her family, even mailed them to her 6 brothers and sisters. One brother loved the wochies so much she mailed tins of them to him overseas when he was in the Army. After he died, we went to his wake and we brought some wochies with us for the family. I'm not sure if it's legal, but his children put one in his casket.

Traditionally, these Sicilian Christmas cookies are "cucidati" - Sicilian for "little bracelets," but Nina's mother-in-law called them "woochie-dadas" and so does the Panzica household at Nina's firm insistence.

My husband jokes he knows where misnomer "woochie" came from: "Since there's wine in the fig mixture and win in the pastry batter, when my grandmother had finished mixing, my grandfather would disappear with the wine. About an hour later, he would come back slurring, waving the wine bottle, and say: 'Hey, where's the wochies?'"

The original recipe, hand-written by Nina's mother-in-law on the back of a tattered sheet of a paper from the town's department of sanitation where old Uncle Gus worked, had the list of ingredients, the cooking time and temperature, but no other information. It's assumed that if you make the cookies, you know the process.

The procedure to make these gems takes two days, one to make the filling - a ground mixture of figs, raisins, nuts, and wine. No one trimmed the tips off the figs better than my father-in-law, who looked like Gepetto and worked just as faithfully. A second day entailed the making of the pastry dough.

When my dear father-in-law passed away, it was too big a task for Nina to do on her own. Though I'm not much of a cookie baker, I love the tradition attached to these cookies so loved by my family. So I began an new tradition. My kitchen is now the annual hub of wochie production.

In early November, my email goes out to an expanding group of cousins to set a date for wochie-making. On the Thursday before the gathering, my husband Tony and I spend hours preparing the filling - grinding together figs, raisins, nuts, orange peel, wine, and a touch of pepper, using a food processor rather than the traditional hand grinder used by my in-laws.

Then on Saturday or Sunday, the troops arrive. Everyone brings an appetizer and/or dessert, as Italians cannot survive without their snacks. Four generations surround my kitchen table from 90 year old Nina to my 9 year old niece.

Two huge bowls filled with flour, shortening, sugar and more wine are needed for the dough-making process. It takes many hands to mix the dough to proper form. Once the pastry is ready, the assembling of the wochies begins.

The kitchen table, covered end to end with wax paper, is wochie central.

Armed with large and small rolling pins, scoops of dough are flattened, stuffed, shaped and cut. The shapes take on a myriad of forms. My son, the master cookie sculptor, creates such unique designs we can't eat them, but only admire them. One year, he sculpted an image of Nina herself.

I stand at the ready, putting cookie sheet after cookie sheet into the oven for exactly 37 minutes apiece. As the cookie sheets come out of the oven, I place the wochies on cooling racks covering every square inch of counter space.

During the cool down, the snacks are devoured in the dining room amid much joyful and poignant reminiscing.

Then step 3, the icing process, commences. Just the right consistency must be attained. An extra drop of water in the massive bowl of confectioners' sugar will make the icing drip right off the cookies. Too little liquid makes the icing hard and unmanageable. And the sprinkles must be sprinkled immediately after applying the icing or they won't adhere.

Before the icing is dry and the wochies are packed into their containers for the bakers to take home, a few must be sampled just to make sure they came out to Nina's standards.

My mother-in-law passed away last year, but the legacy she left carries on with side-splitting laughter, delectable cookies, family gatherings, and new memories being made each year. As my son said, "This symbolizes the connections in our family - something as simple as a cookie."

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