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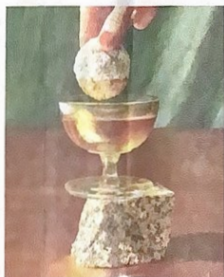
Best Cookies *in the* World

We're talking about the effortlessly elegant biscotti of Italy, starring in this season's smartest holiday spreads. Use our field guide to find festive Italian recipes big on flavor, low on fussy flourishes

By CHARLOTTE DRUCKMAN

TO ALL THE COOKIES I've loved before, that traveled in and out my door during the pandemic (and there have been many), I'm glad they came along, but I'd dedicate a song to baker Rick Easton's collection of Italian cookies. I keep returning to this assortment of not-very-sweet biscuits from Mr. Easton's bakery, Bread and Salt, in Jersey City, N.J. Each one is distinguished by a single salient ingredient or two—the bitter almond of the soft amaretti morbidi, the sesame seeds of the crunchy reginele made with lard “for a little more of that Palermo bakery taste,” the shop's description reads.

They appeal to me as someone who loves to bake but doesn't love a fussy production. Italian cookies typically contain no more ingredients than you can count on one hand. And though you'll find baroque adorned sweets at Italy's pasticceria, the majority of that nation's biscotti (the generic word



This spiced walnut cookie is delicious dunked in vin santo.

for cookies) are quite plain in appearance.

They're also durable and long lasting—optimal for shipping, sharing and making in advance.

Those are traits you want in a Christmas cookie. Are they not? Dress them up if that's what “festive” means to you. But I'd rather receive a tin of subtly diverse, flavorful cookies than a bunch of sawdust packs covered in stiff, sugary icing.

So this year, I'm going Italian on the holiday cookies. In addition to Bread and Salt, I had a number of sources to turn to thanks to the recent publication of some outstanding cookbooks on Italian cuisine, some of them specifically about sweets.

First I grabbed Anna Del Conte's classic “Italian Kitchen. I Dolci.” “If you open a regional Italian cookbook, you will find more recipes for cookies than for any type of sweetmeat,” she writes. “This is because, in Italy, desserts tend to be eaten at any time of day, whereas to have a dessert at the end of a meal is unusual. Cookies are often eaten casually, as a snack, with a glass of wine, sitting around the

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DESIGN & DECORATING

A Change of
Hearth

Artful ways to make the most of a nonworking—or summering—fireplace, courtesy of design pros

By NINA MOLINA

WHAT TO DO with a fireplace that's purely decorative or is sitting idle in the offseason? It's unfortunately a perfect place to house a cliché—birch logs, five fat candles, that inane books-turned-bindings-in-trick. Jenise Carrier, of New York's Carrier and Company, is more optimistic: "The fireplace is an

Phillip Thomas. His choice of illumination: "logs" of Selemitz, a mineral that forms in large, luminous translucent crystals. They capture light and create a lovely glow, he said, "almost making it feel like there's a fire lit."

Build a Wee Reading Nook A nonworking fireplace is a perfect place for a kids' reading nook, said Shaolin Low, an interior designer in Honolulu, where fireplaces rarely see the business end of a match. "You can paint the interior an accent color. Add shelving for books and a custom cushion for the floor so [small children] can cozy up and read," she said.

...Or a Doggie Den "We were turning a room that was not originally a kitchen into one," said recipe writer and photographer Julia Sherman of her former Brooklyn brownstone. "We deduced [the fireplace] would be perfect for a doghouse," she said. "We didn't do much besides clean up the marble and redo the brick." There her terrier mix, Lucy, hung out in the kitchen without being underfoot.

Max Out the Mantel The shelf the mantel creates is prime gallery space. Sidestep a cluttered look with a coherent collection. New York designer Rodney Lawrence topped a Victorian mantel with scores of pose-able wooden monkey sculptures by Kay Bojesen, positioned in every conceivable attitude. Similarly, in Garrison, N.Y., Brooklyn's Workstead studio amassed a collection of vessels by North Carolina potter



LEFT OF CENTER In a Dublin house by Kingston Lafferty Design, a single potted cactus looks intentional, not lonely.

Ben Owen, unified by their cream color.

off an off-center potted cactus.

Riff on an Existing Theme

In a Dublin house, shows above, local firm Kingston Lafferty surrounded a fireplace with sage-green built-ins and inscribed the fronts with a blown-out cross-hatch pattern. The designers updated the firebox with tiles in keeping with the overall style of the house, positioning the squares on a diagonal to create a complementary, smaller-scale cross hatch. Their lemony lightness sets

Come Into the Room

You can make a tableau more dimensional, less blah by setting objects down on the hearth that extends from the fireplace. Mr. Lawrence left the original cast iron decorative screen in the mouth of the Victorian fireplace, then added large, clear glass vessels in front. One holds a collection of vintage wooden balls of varying sizes; the other, antique wooden eggs. The result, a layered installation.

Store Stuff, of Course

Stowing things in the little cavern works as long as you don't make your room's focal point an eye sore. Designers Carrier and Company set a wicker container in the fireplace of a living room in a 1920s house in Long Island, N.Y., that's decorated with furniture upholstered in vintage grain sacks and a sisal rug. "The basket nods to the countryside setting of the home, fits neatly inside the firebox and serves as attractive storage by holding canvas cushions for chairs on the adjacent porch," said Mr. Carrier.



A prized collection of pottery by Ben Owen crowns a mantel in a house designed by Brooklyn's Workstead.

architectural focalpoint in a room, a wonderful stage to set with accessories and mementos that tell your story." He and other interior designers shared fresh ideas for sparking a room's black hole, whether a fireplace that doesn't work at all or one that's just enjoying the summer off.

Bring on the Crystals

"I think it is essential to find ways to bring light into a nonworking fireplace," said New York designer

FLOWER SCHOOL



THE ARRANGEMENT

An American
In Venice

Floral designer Lindsey Taylor draws inspiration from an Italian scene

KENTUCKY-BORN painter Frank Duveneck (1848-1919) spent many years studying and teaching in Europe. For this month's muse, I turned to one of his pieces showing at an exhibit at Washington, D.C.'s Smithsonian American Art Museum until May 8, "Sargent, Whistler, and Venetian Glass: American Artists and the Magic of Murano." His nearly 6-foot wide painting, "Water Carriers, Venice" (1894) depicts local fishermen and their families going about their daily chores, and it got me thinking about a holiday arrangement without the flashy go-to reds and greens.

To capture the work's pleasantly muted tones I choose an earthy mustard-colored crock for my vase and



THE INSPIRATION

gathered a mix of mostly late-season flowers: lilac asters, russet strawflowers, the remaining blooms from off-white hydrangea, claret-colored crab-apples, burgundy heptacodium (Seven Son flower) bracts and various foliage and seed heads. Off-season larspur from the flower market gave me the splash of blue water seen behind the balustrades. Consistent with the everyday people in the painting, the humble bouquet is neither belabored or fancy. All its flowers are equally important, a wildflower-like bundle you could imagine one of the figures carrying.

Late-season flora like grass seed heads and asters complement the unassuming figures in "Water Carriers, Venice" (1894) by Frank Duveneck.

— Vessel, designer's own



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