

Macaroons are tricky, but very good

By HELEN MOISE

Is the macaroon, that small, round crumbly confection, French or Italian? No one knows for sure, except that macaroons have been a delicacy in France for over 200 years. It is said that the French got the macaroon from Italy in the 16th Century.

At any rate, this mixture of ground almonds or almond paste, sugar and egg white is a challenge to bake.



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The macaroon mixture should have a soft and creamy texture. When squeezed from a medium-sized round tube, it should be smooth and firm. If the top appears rough, the mixture is too hard and will result in macaroons that will not crack properly and will taste gluey.

On the other hand, if the mixture is too soft the macaroons will bake hollow, dry out and lose flavor.

The egg whites act as a binding medium and will keep the macaroons moist and soft. So the soft creamy mixture is made by adding more or fewer eggs.

One way to find out if the texture is too soft is to test a few in the oven before baking up the whole batch.

Macaroons will stay soft for weeks if you store them in covered tins in the refrigerator. They are great crumbled up over ice creams and other desserts as well as eating out of hand.

Try your skills on the ones using almond paste or ground almonds. But first, here is a recipe for making your own almond paste.

Almond paste

- 1½ cups finely ground blanched almonds*
- ¾ cup sugar
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ cup water
- Few drops almond extract

Mix ground almonds, sugar and salt. Add to water and cook 20 minutes in a covered double boiler. Stir while cooling and add almond extract. Pack paste in a covered container and store in refrigerator 24 hours.

*To blanch almonds pour boiling water over them in a small pan. Let stand several minutes. Drain. Slip off skins with fingers. Dry at room temperature on absorbent paper towels overnight.

Almond-paste macaroons

- 1 cup almond paste
- 4 egg whites
- ¾ cup sugar

- 2 tablespoons sifted cake flour
- ¼ teaspoon salt

Preheat oven to 300 degrees.

Cut almond paste into thin slices and very gradually work in 2 of the egg whites. Thoroughly mix in sugar, flour and salt.

Mix in remaining egg whites a little at a time, working until mixture is free from lumps.

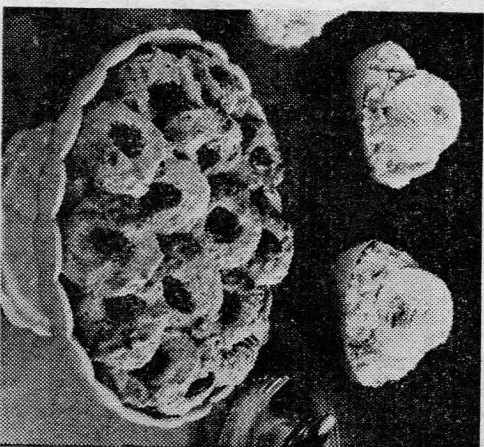
With 2 teaspoons make small thick drops about the size of a quarter 2 inches apart on a baking sheet covered with unglazed paper or squeeze out of pastry tube using medium size round tube. Bake in preheated oven 20 to 30 minutes, or until lightly browned.

After cooling, dampen the underside of the paper. Let stand a few minutes, then remove cookies from paper. Makes about 2½ dozen cookies.

French macaroons

- ½ pound blanched almonds
- 2 egg whites, unbeaten
- ¾ cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 stiffly beaten egg white

Pound almonds or pass them through food chopper, using the finest knife. Add gradually the unbeaten egg whites, alternately with the sugar and vanilla.



Work in the stiffly beaten egg white, a little at a time, mixing thoroughly between additions. Turn paste into a pastry bag fitted with a plain tube and press small balls the size of a walnut onto waxed paper on a cookie sheet.

Lacking a pastry bag, the mixture may be dropped from the tip of a spoon.

Bake in preheated oven 15 to 20 minutes. Cool, then tear off the paper and join the macaroons by placing the flat bases together in pairs.

For soft macaroons add 2 teaspoons of cornstarch to the above mixture.