Cookie Dough

Cookie Dough = 1 part sugar : 2 parts fat : 3 parts flour

This is chef and teacher Bob del Grosso’s favorite example of a kitchen ratio, and his affection for it is instructive about ratios generally. Bob is a friend and adviser and this recipe, as he has noted, will not give you art or the best cookie ever made. But it will give you a good solid short cookie and, in so doing, instruct the thoughtful cook about proportions in a short sweet dough and the nature of a cookie. One part sugar, 2 parts fat, 3 parts flour, will result in a cookie with the right texture and crunch, and the right balance of fat and sugar. It is, of course, very plain—sugar, butter, and flour—a shortbread. I appreciate most its level of sweetness—just enough to satisfy, but not so much that it’s cloying. The quality of the butter, the only ingredient with significant flavor, is important. Don’t use butter that’s been sitting around for a while; use good flavorful butter. I use either salted or unsalted—I think these cookies benefit from a little salt, so if you prefer unsalted butter (and when you bake, this does give you a little more control), consider adding a pinch of salt. But use good butter and fresh flour. In this plainness is its excellence. And, of course, the dough is easily enhanced in any number of ways, depending on additional ingredients (nuts, candy,

These lemon–poppy seed cookies use a standard cookie ratio of 3 parts flour, 2 parts fat, and 1 part sugar.
seeds), flavors (extracts, zests), or garnish (sprinkles, colored sugars, flavored glazes).

So, unlike any of the other dough ratios, all of which are typically enjoyed as they are and without adornment, you would almost never simply use the cookie dough recipe as is, but would typically add some kind of additional ingredients.

It's a good recipe to do once though, without anything extraneous, so that you can understand what a cookie is. Taste a plain cookie, note its texture, note the level of sweetness, the flavor of the butter, the flavor contributed by the flour. And because it's a solid ratio, you can make a small quantity quickly—an ounce of sugar, creamed into ½ stick of butter, with 3 ounces of flour folded in. This will result in what can be considered the essence of a cookie. Take any single ingredient away and it ceases to be a cookie, becomes something else entirely; take away the sugar and you have roux or beurre manié, take away the flour and you have icing. This ratio is a diamond.

But simply add a topping of chopped almonds or pistachios and it becomes a superb cookie. Some friends who helped me test these recipes referred to them as adult cookies. My kids will sneak these cookies, so they're not only for adults, but I do understand the comment. They're not chewy and rich with fat. If you're looking for something light to offer after dinner with coffee, or with afternoon tea, or a midmorning snack to munch on, these are a pleasure.

1-2-3 Cookie Dough: The Essence-of-a-Cookie Cookie

2 ounces sugar (about 4½ tablespoons)
4 ounces unsalted butter (1 stick), soft but not melted
6 ounces flour (1 to 1¼ cups)

Combine the sugar and butter, and mix, beat, or whisk until the sugar is evenly distributed and the butter has become light in color. (It wouldn't hurt if you added a pinch of salt and ¼ teaspoon of vanilla here.) Fold in the flour gradually and continue to mix until a uniform dough is formed. I prefer these cookies very thin and so roll them into a log using plastic wrap, chill them, and slice them about ⅛ inch thick. Or you can roll the dough into 1½-inch balls, place them on a baking sheet, and press them down to a thickness of ¼ inch or as desired. Bake in a 350°F oven until cooked through, 15 to 20 minutes. Because there is relatively little fat, these cookies will not spread out as they bake. This recipe will give you 5 to 10 cookies.

What You Can Do Now That You Have the 1-2-3 Cookie Dough Ratio

What I like best is that I can make cookies at the last minute, as many or as little as I need or would like. Five minutes, and they're in the oven. But also, the recipe teaches you about how these fundamental ingredients, flour, sugar, and butter, interact. Variations are infinite and fall into three categories—changing the flavor, swapping an ingredient, or altering the proportion of flour relative to the fat and sugar.

- The flavor variations are what make the plain cookie distinctive. Some simple variations that add flavor, crunch, and visual appeal to these are nuts. Shape the dough into balls, press the balls into chopped almonds before placing them on the baking sheet, and press them to the desired thickness.
- Other nuts that are excellent to use with these cookies: chopped or whole pistachios (for the most visual appeal, use blanched and peeled pistachios), walnuts, hazelnuts, macadamia nuts, and cashews. For color and flavor, pistachios are my favorite.
- A final nut variation is to pulverize the nuts and replace ⅛ the flour with your nut powder. This is a version of Linzer dough, which has hazelnuts.
- Add a teaspoon of poppy seeds, the grated zest of 1 lemon, and ¼ teaspoon of vanilla to the above essence-of-a-cookie recipe for Lemon-Poppy Seed Cookies (page 41).
- Add ¼ teaspoon each of cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg.
- Add ½ teaspoon of almond extract.
- Add chocolate. Melt 3 ounces of good semisweet or bittersweet chocolate, sift the flour over it, and fold it into the butter and sugar. (This could be in other categories of variations—in the
sugar category because it sweetens, and in the fat category, because it adds fat.)
- Instead of chocolate, add peanut butter.

Another ingredient you can vary is the type of sugar used.
- Use brown sugar instead of white sugar for a darker cookie with a more complex sweetness that is a little chewier and quicker to brown.
- Use agave nectar for a cookie with a lower glycemic index. (The glycemic index describes the speed with which carbohydrates break down and release glucose in the body; foods with a low glycemic index have been shown to have beneficial effects on the body.) Used at the same ratio as sugar, this will result in a sweeter cookie than one using white sugar.
- Use a combination of sugar and molasses (see the spice cookies on page 42 for a variation).
- Use a combination of sugar and honey.

The last ingredient to alternate is the butter. Try using different saturated fats (fats that are solid at room temperature).
- When making flavored cookies, you can use a vegetable shortening, which gives the cookies a distinct crispiness. Lard can replace the butter as well, but, again, do this only when you’re adding a lot of other flavors to the dough because the lard can add a distinctive savory, even porky, note to the cookie. You may want to add a teaspoon or so of water or milk when using a rendered fat, which has no water (butter contains about 15 percent water).
- Use other pliable animal fats to create a cookie to accompany a savory dish.

Other issues:
- Adding other ingredients such as eggs and baking powder change the nature of the cookie as well. Both will help give a little softer, airier crumb. Adding whipped egg whites results in a different kind of cookie, a delicate tuile. A common tuile ratio is equal parts egg white, sugar, and flour; stir in another part melted butter and some almond extract for French almond tuile.
- Varying the ratio will give you a different quality cookie. If you make a cookie dough of equal parts sugar, butter, and flour, you’ll get a very rich chewy cookie—often called drop cookies because they’re dropped from a spoon onto the baking sheet—but a little on the oily side without the addition of other ingredients such as eggs and some sort of garnish, such as chocolate chips. Some recipes reduce the butter to one-half the amount. Increasing the ratio of sugar will give you a crisper cookie.

Classic Variations We Know by Other Names

Lemon–Poppy Seed Cookies

The lemon–poppy seed combination is one of my favorites, in both cakes and cookies. I love the fresh flavor the citrus zest brings. I have no idea what the poppy seeds, which are 50 percent fat by weight, bring, except to say that it’s a completely different, and lesser, cookie if you leave them out.

6 ounces sugar (about ¾ cup)
12 ounces butter (3 sticks), soft but not melted
1 large egg (optional)
1 tablespoon poppy seeds
Zest of 3 lemons
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
18 ounces flour

Preheat your oven to 350°F.

Combine the sugar and butter in a standing mixer with the paddle attachment, and mix on medium speed, scraping the butter down as necessary, until the sugar is evenly distributed and the butter has become light in color. Add the egg, if using, while mixing until incorporated, then add the poppy seeds, zest, and vanilla. Add the flour grad-
ually and continue to mix until a uniform dough comes together. Roll into 1-inch balls, place them on a baking sheet, press down to a thickness of between 1/4 and 1/2 inch or as desired, and bake until cooked through. This dough can also be shaped into a log using plastic wrap or parchment paper, chilled, and sliced.

YIELD: ABOUT 30 COOKIES

Rip's Spice Cookies

This was my father's favorite cookie, a variant of the ginger cookie, and I've adapted it here as a contrast to the 3-2-1 cookie: it uses nearly a 1 to 1 ratio of fat to flour, plus 1 egg, and so has a good deal more give in its bite and more richness in feel than the drier, shortbreadlike 3-2-1 cookie.

Using a scale to measure the shortening makes for much cleaner work than measuring shortening by volume. This recipe calls for 10 ounces (about 1 1/2 cups by volume) of shortening. Place your mixing bowl on a scale, zero it, and add 10 ounces of the shortening.

Pay attention here to a shift in the ratio: this recipe calls for a nearly equal ratio of flour, fat, and sugar. Because of this, the cookies will spread out, so leave some room between cookies on the baking sheet. The egg and baking powder will give the cookie a little lift, a slightly less dense crumb.

10 ounces vegetable shortening (1 1/2 cups)
8 ounces sugar (about 1 cup)
1 large egg
1/4 cup molasses
12 ounces flour (about 2 cups)
1 teaspoon baking powder
2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon ground ginger
1/4 teaspoon salt

Preheat your oven to 350°F.

Combine the shortening, sugar, and egg and mix thoroughly in a standing mixer or by hand. Add the molasses and continue mixing. Combine the remaining ingredients and fold them into the dough.

Roll into small balls or spoon out tablespoons of dough onto a baking sheet. Give them some room because they’ll spread. Bake for 15 minutes or until the edges begin to darken.

YIELD: ABOUT 24 COOKIES

Classic Chocolate Chip Cookies

This recipe calls for equal parts butter, sugar, and flour, so has a very high proportion of fat, which will cause them to spread considerably and result in a very thin crisp chocolate chip cookie. If you prefer your cookies crisper, reduce the butter to 4 ounces.

8 ounces unsalted butter (2 sticks)
4 ounces white sugar (about 1/2 cup)
4 ounces brown sugar (about 1/2 cup)
1 large egg
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/2 teaspoon salt
8 ounces flour (about 1 1/2 cups)
1 teaspoon baking powder
1 cup chocolate chips or chopped chocolate

Preheat your oven to 350°F.

Combine the butter, sugars, egg, and vanilla and mix thoroughly in a standing mixer using the paddle attachment or by hand. Combine the remaining ingredients except the chocolate and fold them into the dough. Fold the chocolate into the dough.

Drop heaping tablespoons onto a baking sheet. Give them some room because they’ll spread. Bake for 10 minutes or until the edges begin to darken.

YIELD: ABOUT 24 COOKIES
Classic Sugar Cookies

A similar variation to the chocolate chip cookie—but here, equal parts butter and sugar are combined with egg and 50 percent more flour, or 1.5 parts flour. Also, only white sugar is used. These can be sprinkled with colored sugar, coarse sugar, or coarsely chopped almonds for visual appeal.

8 ounces unsalted butter (2 sticks)
8 ounces sugar (about 1 cup)
1 large egg
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
½ teaspoon salt
12 ounces flour (about 2 cups)
1 teaspoon baking powder
Optional garnish: colored sugar, coarse sugar, or coarsely chopped almonds

Preheat your oven to 350°F.

Combine the butter, sugar, egg, and vanilla and mix thoroughly in a standing mixer or by hand. Combine the remaining ingredients, except garnish, and fold them into the dough. Wrap the dough in plastic wrap and refrigerate until thoroughly chilled.

This dough can be rolled out flat and the cookies can be cut out from it. It can be shaped into individual balls and flattened with the bottom of a glass. It can be rolled into a cylinder, chilled, and sliced. Sprinkle with garnish, if desired.

Bake for 15 minutes or until done (slightly brown around edges).

YIELD: ABOUT 24 COOKIES