

# Cuccitati



## Nana's Recipe for Sicilian Christmas Cookies

by

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# **CUCCIUTATI**

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## AVANTI



**Cuccitati** (coo-chee-tah-tee) – also called Vucciddrati, Cuccidadi, Buccellati and other variations depending on the Sicilian or Italian-American version of the word – are fig and nut-stuffed cookies prepared exclusively at Christmas time. More than anything, this humble cookie is emblematic of Italian-American family traditions that are renewed each Christmas over the generations, even though a family may have lost any actual connection with the ‘Old Country’.

The recipe offered in this little book was handed down from my great-grandmother, Anna D’Amore, who arrived at Ellis Island in New York harbor as a tiny girl in 1892. She grew up among Chicago’s Taylor Street Italian immigrant community then, after her marriage to Great-grandpa Salvatore in 1906, moved to the parish of Santa Maria Incoronata on the city’s South Side, at the time a predominantly Sicilian-American community. Their union produced eight children among whom my Nana, Anne Virginia, was the youngest. She passed down the recipe to my father, then to me and now to you.



## UN POCO DI STORIA



(A Little History)

The entire history of the island of Sicily can be experienced in each bite of **Cuccitati** if one knows how to read the code. Shape, color, texture, aroma, flavor: each quality explains a little about how this cookie came to become so popular and why it travelled so well on the tide of Sicilian immigration during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea, located practically in the very center of the Mediterranean Basin between the Italian peninsula and Africa. Archaeological evidence of human habitation near the village of Caltabellotta dates from 12,000 BC.



By 750 BC, the island had hosted three Phoenician and a dozen Greek colonies, typical of these being the Valley of the Temples near Caltabellotta in the province of Agrigento. For the next 600 years, it was the site of the Sicilian Wars and the Punic Wars,



which ended with the Roman Republic's destruction of Carthage at the battle of Carthage (c. 149 BC).

Perhaps the most important item of information to come from the ancient chronicles is that all the major civilizations struggled to control the island for one peculiar reason: the hard, red wheat that flourishes in its special semi-volcanic soil. It was a grain that travelled well without spoilage and therefore could supply huge armies with a staple foodstuff. The expansion of the Roman Empire depended on controlling the supply of this particular variety of wheat, now widely known as 'semolina'. Remnants of Sicilian semolina were discovered sealed inside ancient amphorae and plant scientists have succeeded in sprouting some of these grains and isolating its genetic code.

Semolina is the most desirable variety of flour used to make the **Cuccitati** cookie shell. It is the same flour that authentic Italian pasta products are made from, although semolina flour isn't always easy to find in shops outside Italy. Of course, you can use any type of good quality baking flour, either bleached or unbleached, or even whole-wheat flour. My great-grandmother used American unbleached white flour to make her **Cuccitati**, simply because semolina flour wasn't readily available in the neighborhood.

Sicily enjoys a typical Mediterranean climate of hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters. The ingredients that make up the **Cuccitati** filling are readily available everywhere on the island, growing wild in most areas. Sicilian cuisine has traditionally been a cuisine of famine, that is, most people were impoverished by today's standards and relied on what they could grow or gather from the wild. Sicilian dishes are simple and use the most basic ingredients with local herbs and spices that flourish along the roadsides and hedgerows.

Most of the arable land of the island had always been owned and controlled by large landholders called *latifondisti*. These large land holdings were worked by tenant farmers who, for the most part, were little better than slaves. Many families relied on what they grew in their own tiny gardens or could gather by illegal hunting, gleaning beans and vegetables from the fields of the great estates after the pickers had finished the harvest, or by combing the meadows and woodlands for native greens, fruits and nuts.

The most prominent and best known of the early inhabitants of the island were called *Sicani* from which comes the word *Siculi*, a term still used by Sicilians to define themselves. The *Sicani* were said to have come from the Iberian Peninsula, perhaps from the area of present day Catalonia. After the Phoenician, Greek,

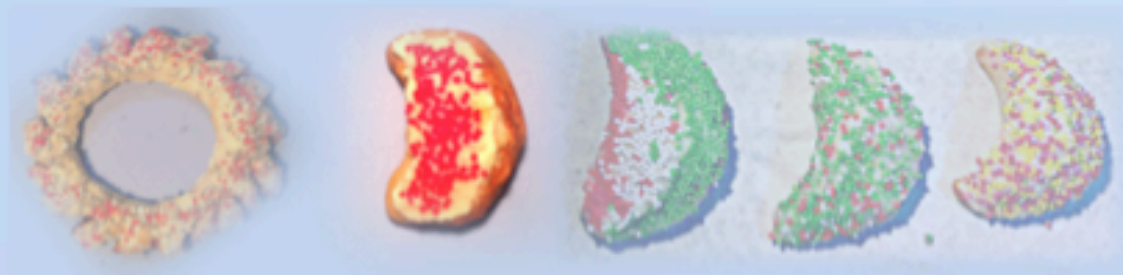


Carthaginian, Roman and Byzantine periods, there was an influx of northern European blood with the invasions of the Vandals then the Normans. Today, there are as many blue-eyed blonds and redheads in Palermo as might be found in any French, German or Dutch city, due to the northern European contribution to the gene pool. Yet the most significant impact on the character of **Cuccitati** were the Muslim invasions after the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

The influx of Arabic language and culture is still evident in Sicilian customs and dialect today. The Arabs contributed words like *cassata* (Sicilian ricotta cake, originally from North Africa), *zagara* (blossom), *babbaluciu* (snail), *giugiulena* (sesame seed), *mafia* (to swagger), *zaffarana* (saffron), *zuccu* (market), *zibbibbu* (a dried grape or raisin), and Kabbalat or Caltabellotta, the village where my family originated. At the time when my great-grandmother immigrated to the USA, the province itself was still called Girgenti, an Arab-derived word, but Mussolini ordered it changed to the more Roman-sounding Agrigento, alluding to its role as the breadbasket of Italy.

Although **Cuccitati** have evolved into various other ‘Christmassy’ shapes more emblematic of Northern European and American traditions – wreaths, hearts, holly leaves, mistletoe and

whatnot – the most authentic is the **crescent** that derives from the Arab period when Islam was the dominant religion of the island.



Non-authentic Cuccitati



Fig Newton

Beside the traditional crescent, **Cuccitati** are often shaped according to the whim of the pastry chef. They can be found for sale in Italian bakeries in a familiar form more closely resembling the famous Fig Newton, a popular American cookie stocked on grocers' shelves for generations.

In the old days, **Cuccitati** were handed to children as gifts, perhaps as subtle messages harking back to a distant past, symbolic of Sicilians' Islamic roots before the Spanish colonization of the island resulted in the persecution and expulsion of 'Moors' and Jews during and after the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. Many Moorish families converted to Christianity as a means of survival – the so-called Conversos – but nonetheless secretly retained some elements of their heritage in their cooking, and they used familiar Arabic



phrases and symbols to subtly communicate amongst themselves. The traditional crescent shape of the **Cuccitati** is quite likely another expression of this residual culture.

Christmas trees, Santa Claus and reindeer are not Sicilian or even Italian symbols, Natale being a religious festival that culminates on January 6 with the coming of the Three Wise Men. Its most profound expression and *raison d'être* is found in the celebration of the Winter Solstice with the rebirth of the light. Instead of Santa Claus, Italian children expect a visit from La Befana, an old fairy with a broom who comes skating down a frozen river, carrying gifts for children on the night of January 5, called Befania. The word may derive from the Italian Epifania, meaning Epiphany, although there are some pre-Christian interpretations as well. There are no frozen rivers in sub-tropical Sicily. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century world of my great-grandmother, children's expectations were modest: a prettily wrapped paper package containing a few **Cuccitati** was a gift sufficient to bring a fleeting moment of happiness to any poor child.

The crescent moon, as depicted in art symbolizes many things, but primarily the fecundity of life as influenced by its cycle of waxing and waning.

The crescent motif alludes to the female reproductive organs, as well as the horns of the bull, representing the duality of the energy force in the world, the *yin* and *yang* of life. The Virgin Maria is often depicted perching on a crescent moon. The crescent moon is the alchemical symbol for silver, and is the emblem of Diana-Artemis, and therefore represents virginity.



When it comes to filling, there would be no **Cuccitati**, or Fig Newton's either, if it weren't for the humble fig with its luscious internals dripping with thick honey-like syrup. Curiously, the fig tree was cursed by Jesus in Matthew 21:18-22: *"...And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, He went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then He said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once."*

The **Cuccitati** is an earthy treat, containing not only the colors and textures and odors of the fecund Sicilian soil from which it springs but all the essential nutrients as well: carbohydrates in its mollusk-like shell, protein and oils in its nut meats, vitamins A, C, and D in its dried fruits, and a high fiber content. It's a survival



bar: one can live on **Cuccitati**, along with a good espresso or cappuccino, of course.

There are probably as many variations of the recipe as there are cooks but the basic ingredients – a firm but flakey cookie shell, fig-walnut stuffing garnished with orange and lemon zests, a dash of Marsala wine or whiskey – are fundamental.

Some cookbooks and the Internet offer a variety of Cuccitati recipes – Google the word ‘Cuccidati’ to get a sense of what’s out there. Some of these recipes are not authentic and I would bet a Bitcoin that their writers have never prepared **Cuccitati** or even tasted one. One claims to have gotten his recipe straight from that ancient Sicilian woman in the ‘old neighborhood’, but I’ll wager another Bitcoin that the crafty old lady enjoyed a good laugh when she saw her list of ingredients in print. I can’t imagine how one could use 1 ½ cups of strong black coffee in this recipe. Chocolate chips are another addition to the filling that brings up a huge question mark. Along with the figs, nuts, dates, raisins, etcetera, it would seem an explosive combination. She probably drank the coffee and nibbled on the chocolate but would be horrified to find this stuff inside a **Cuccitati**. It’s okay to be creative but, hey, if you want chocolate chip cookies then throw some in too!

And so. *Andiamo in cucina....*



## IN CUCCINA

(In the Kitchen)



Let's start with my Nana's ingredients. You can add or subtract, as you like, so long as the dough has good texture and the filling is based mainly on figs and nuts. This recipe makes about 64 cookies.

### Ingredienti

#### Dough:

- 2 cups Crisco (vegetable shortening)
- 5 eggs, beaten
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 ½ tablespoons baking powder
- 1 cup granulated white sugar (or to taste)
- 6 cups flour (add more if sticky)

#### Filling:

- ½ cup chopped walnuts (1/2 lb)
- 1 cup chopped figs
- 1 lb seedless raisins
- 3 Tablespoons granulated white sugar
- ½ cup water
- Juice of ½ orange
- Grated rind of ½ orange
- Juice of ½ lemon
- Grated rind of ½ lemon
- 1 Jigger or Marsala wine or whiskey

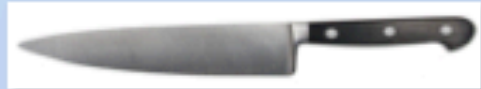




## Equipment & Utensils



Meat grinder for mincing the dried figs and raisins. The machinery is not an absolute must. You can chop with a knife.



A decently heavy kitchen knife or meat cleaver.



A good set of measuring cups and spoons.



A rolling pin or pasta machine.



Steel baking pan or cookie sheet.



Round cookie cutter or goblet about 2 ½ - 3 inches (60 – 75mm) diameter.



## Preparazione

### **Cookie Shell:**

Mix the dry ingredients, add Crisco, then use a hand blender or a pair of forks as with a piecrust. Add eggs and vanilla then knead until smooth. Divide into 4 balls. Put in refrigerator for at least ½ hour to chill. Overnight is okay too, being sure to wrap the balls in transparent plastic wrap or other impermeable material so they don't dry out.

### **Filling:**

Chop or grind the dried figs and place in a saucepan with the raisins, sugar, water, orange juice, lemon juice, and the grated orange and lemon peel. Mix together and cook the filling at low heat for 20 minutes or until thick. You should be able to spoon it without any dripping liquid. When cool, add the walnuts and 1 jigger of whiskey or Marsala wine. Have a glass of wine for



yourself. After cooking, place the mixture in a glass bowl in the refrigerator overnight. Relax. Today's work is done.

Some recipes recommend using a hand-cranked meat grinder or electric food mill to aid in mashing the filling ingredients. This is a good and authentic way to do it, especially when starting with dried Greek figs, the kind that come on a string. These can be as hard and tough as old shoe leather but you can still get by without the grinder. Another option is to start with dried fig cake comprised of pre-ground, dried figs pressed into a block. You only need to crumble it and mix with the other ingredients before cooking, without any chopping or grinding at all.



Whole dried figs.



Dried fig cake.



Dried Greek figs.

I use whole dried figs that are soft and sweet and a lot easier to cut. I never tried fresh figs but who knows? It's not Great-grandma's way but then she didn't have fresh figs in Chicago at Christmas time. Great-grandpa Salvatore went to extraordinary lengths to grow fig trees in the back yard but he needed to bend the bare trunk over double and cover it with a bushel basket topped

with sticks and leaves and an old blanket to get it to survive the winter. I never heard that the tree produced any fruit but maybe it did.



Chopping the figs.



Chopping the walnuts.

If you decide to use a hand grinder or electric food mill, don't put the walnuts through it or you'll end up with nut butter. The walnut retains its characteristic texture and flavor when you simply chop or break them into pieces the size of your pinky fingernail. The walnuts are added to the cooked filling only after it has cooled.



Grating the orange and lemon peel.



O-o-o-oh, shall we add some dates?



You can chop dates in the same way but I'll caution that too many different dried fruits (remember the raisins?) make the **Cuccitati** very rich. Subtlety will be sacrificed and the cookies may become too filling. My Nana and Great-grandma didn't use dates in their recipe. Same advice applies to adding almonds, pistachios, candied fruits, spices such as nutmeg and coriander, or even M&M's to the filling (you can dip the cookie in melted chocolate after baking) or (Heaven forbid!) black coffee. As Einstein advised: "Keep it simple, but not too simple." Remember that Sicilian cooking is a cuisine of famine, creating masterpieces from simple ingredients with a lot of care and attention in their preparation.

### **Making the Cookie:**

Take the dough balls from the refrigerator and cut each into 16 pieces or more, depending on the desired size of the final cookie. The **Cuccitati** are already very rich and filling, so a too-large size cookie can be a bit intimidating. Roll each piece into a ball and flatten to form a disk shape.

A clever way to save time and achieve a uniform dough thickness is to use a hand-cranked pasta machine to roll out the dough. The rolling process also contributes to a more uniform texture. Making the dough is usually the most challenging and sometimes discouraging exercise for the chef, especially as the ball may turn out either too moist or too dry, although the texture seems to change – usually for the better – after removal from the refrigerator. This is more or less normal and can be compensated by dusting the work surface and adding more flour sparingly if the dough is too sticky. I use a plant sprayer to add some moisture if it's too crumbly. Slightly moist dough is better than too-dry dough that won't hold together. Kneading the ball like bread dough for 5 – 10 minutes (say, 100 folds) before chilling really helps to get a good texture by bringing out the gluten in the wheat. Chilled dough rolls out a lot better if you use the pasta machine.





Dough with good texture holds together without crumbling but doesn't stick to hands. This log was kneaded for 5 minutes.

Don't give up on it. Worst case, you can always start again. Sit down and have a glass of that Marsala or a shot of the whiskey (or two). Contemplate the meaning of life. Like everything else, it's only a matter of dough.



Rolling out the dough with a pasta machine.



Cutting the disks.

If the pasta machine is used or if the chef wants to roll out a sheet of dough with the rolling pin, a round cookie cutter 2 ½ to 3

inches (60 to 75mm) in diameter (depending on how large you want your cookie) or the rim of a water glass or goblet can be used to stamp out the circles. This is how I do it. Overall, you achieve a more pleasing result with the more uniform circles and less time is consumed if the dough is in sheet form and several disks are cut one after another. You can use wax paper under your dough so it won't stick to the work surface or make it oily.

After the thin round of dough (thin enough to be light but thick enough not to break, say 1/8 inch or 2-3mm, (but do experiment) is cut, place a dollop of filling in the center of each round. Fold the round in half over the filling then seal the seam with your thumbnail or press with a fork if you like the ripple effect. Now bend the half moon into a crescent shape. Be careful not to break the doughy shell.



Filling the cookie.

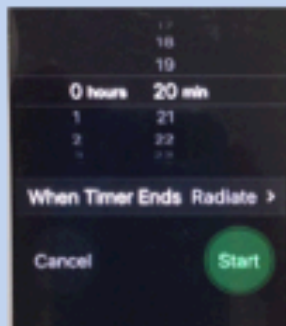


Ready for the oven.

Place the raw cookie on a greased baking pan or cookie sheet. Instead of greasing, oven paper (parchment) can be used to line the



pan to make cleanup easier. Separate the **Cuccitati** on the baking pan by at least the width of one cookie for good heat circulation. After positioning on the sheet, use a sharp knife to make incisions on the top shell, if you want them. With cuts, you may get some leakage of syrup from the filling. Whole or cut, the cookie will bake in the same way and require the same oven time.



On a lower rack of the oven.

Preheat your oven to 350°F (180°C) and bake until golden brown. Set the rack about mid-level or a bit lower in the oven. Each oven is different and the thickness and number of cookies on a baking sheet will impact the baking time. Carefully observe your first full batch as it turns golden brown, noting the baking time (usually around **18 - 20 minutes**), then repeat using these same parameters. A convection oven will bake differently than a conventional gas or electric oven and usually requires less time at

the same temperature. With a conventional (non-convection) oven, be sure to turn your baking sheet when the cookies are about half-baked, to get a more uniform result. Be sure that the broiler element is off or the top crust will burn while the bottom remains raw. You can turn it on very briefly at the end to get that golden glow.



### **Decoration**

If you want a nice shiny glaze without frosting, brush the tops of the cookie with egg white and return to the oven for a minute or two. Note that applying the colored nonpareils now using egg

white as an adhesive will cause them to melt slightly in the oven but the effect can be pleasing. Personally, I sprinkle the colored nonpareils onto the white frosting base for a more authentic visual effect.

### **Frosting Ingredients**

2 Cups powdered sugar

½ Cup unsalted butter or margarine,  
softened

2 to 4 Teaspoons milk

Makes enough to coat 64 cookies

Soften the butter or margarine at room temperature, add the powdered sugar and blend with a fork until smooth, then gradually sprinkle in the milk. Mix until it feels like frosting. I add some lemon zest and substitute fresh lemon juice for the milk to make the frosting more interesting. My Nana and Great-grandma had no recipe for frosting. They just used a pinch of this and that and played it by ear. Fortunately for us, Nana wrote down her mother's basic **Cuccitati** recipe on a piece of loose-leaf paper that we found stuffed inside a copy of the Antoinette Pope Cookbook after she passed away. Otherwise, the knowledge would have been lost because Great-grandma Anna D'Amore never wrote down any of her recipes.



Of course, you can always use commercially prepared frosting.

Apply the frosting using a butter knife or a small flexible spatula, being careful not to break the **Cuccitati**. The cookie must be cold when adding the frosting. Food coloring can also be added to the frosting mixture. While the frosting is still moist, apply the colored nonpareil sprinkles or garnish as desired. It takes about a day before the frosting hardens and the cookie shell fully dries.



Another option is to simply dust the **Cuccitati** with powder sugar after they have thoroughly cooled.



Dusted with powdered sugar



Snow in Caltabellotta

If you like a chocolate coating, then use a good quality baking chocolate melted in a double boiler. Don't heat the chocolate in a sauce pan directly on the burner because this almost guarantees it will burn and ruin the flavor, not to mention an unpleasant cleanup. Once the chocolate is about the consistency of warm molasses, you can then dip the whole **Cuccitati**, or just the ends of crescent, as desired. Set aside on a piece of wax paper to thoroughly cool before serving or place briefly in a refrigerator.

### **A Few More Thoughts:**

Note that the filling ingredients once combined must be cooked (simmered) on the stovetop then the whiskey or Marsala wine added and the mixture left to mellow overnight (sleeping off a hangover). Like most Italian cooking, the result will be even more flavorful the next day. Some recipes call for preparing the ingredients, making the dough, stuffing the cookies and baking, all in one continuous operation, and you can certainly do it this way. If nothing else, preparing the filling on one day then leaving it in the fridge overnight, as my Nana did, is a lot kinder to both the cook and the cookie. Unlike tossing off a batch of shortbreads or oatmeal-chocolate chip cookies, making **Cuccitati** is time consuming and a bit frustrating, especially the first time. It's an



activity best accomplished in stages and, if blessed with a team of eager little helpers, can easily become a family ritual.

**Cuccitati** will keep a long time without refrigeration due to the sugar content of the filling. Pack them in layers in a good metal cookie tin and store in a cool, dry place. If kept away from moisture, the cookies will still be edible and retain their texture and flavor for one or two months. You can also freeze them then thaw and return to the oven for a few minutes to make crisp, so long as there is no frosting or chocolate coating to melt in the heat.



**ENJOY THE HOLIDAY SEASON. . .**