

Gingerbread for Gretel

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My mother spoiled me with books, and my prized possession was a gilded copy of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, which I pored over with all the twisted earnestness of Wednesday Addams. The details never lost their punch between readings: the revelation of the wolf's fearsome maw beneath granny's spectacles, the quiver of schadenfreude at Cinderella's feathered friends blinding her bullying step-sisters, and the unfettered glee when wicked tricksters fall to their ruin. Most importantly, bad children might be rescued in some versions, but they were always punished. While Disney weather was in full effect in my childhood home in Miami, the treacherous forests of German fairy tales served as cautionary tales to a curious child tempted to stray from her path.

Hansel and Gretel is not my favorite fairy tale, but once upon a time, I was a hungry child lost in a gingerbread forest. My grandparents took me to a Christmas event at Walt Disney World, filled with extravagant Christmas decorations, parades, caroling and gorgeous exhibitions, including a wealth of gingerbread architecture covered in candies and delicately piped icing. These houses and storybook castles were the epitome of my Grimm-fueled fantasies. Consequences were forgotten, and my hand shot forward and claimed a piece of siding. As my dismayed grandparents turned in horror, I jammed the contraband into my mouth. *Bad children are always punished.* The disappointment at the flavorless pressboard confection was far worse than my grandfather's spanking.

Despite my initial letdown, I remained enchanted with gingerbread throughout my childhood. I chomped the heads of ginger men with gusto, leaving hundreds of little ginger widows in my wake. When I was deemed fit to partake in civilized functions again, my grandmother took me to high tea, where I had my first fat square of ginger tea bread. With the first bite, I finally understood why Hansel and Gretel were so sorely tempted. Chewy, dense and chocolate colored, this was closer to the fabled gingerbread of my imagination. As I began to bake for myself, I tried many gingerbread recipes, but none satisfied. No longer afraid of wolves and conniving fairies, I stepped off the path.

Beware, reader: there are always consequences, and this time, they're delightful. This is no mild-mannered, blond ginger spice cake: this is dangerous, original Grimm's gingerbread: fragrant, dark and fudgy. This is the sort of inescapable temptation that lures Hansel and his sister into harm's way; the sort of treacly confection Monsieur Wolf scents as he lopes through a deeply greening wood. Do not be afraid of the half cup of spices involved in this recipe, because all wonderful adventures take a feat of daring.

Gingerbread for Gretel

1/2 cup vegetable oil, plus extra for the pan
1 cup cane sugar
1 cup robust or blackstrap molasses
2-4 tablespoons crystallized ginger, minced
2 large eggs, at room temperature, lightly beaten with a fork
3 cups unbleached all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons ground ginger
1 tablespoon fresh ginger root, peeled and grated

1 tablespoon ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon fine salt
1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg
1/2 teaspoon ground cloves
1 greedy pinch of freshly ground black pepper
1 cup water
1 tablespoon baking soda
several handfuls of blanched almond slivers

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Even if you're using silicone bakeware, generously oil your favorite bundt mold, muffin tins or brownie tin. This is perilously sticky batter.

Sprinkle almonds into the bottom of the pan. You want a goodly amount, but not full coverage. Imagine fallen logs littering the Black Forest's floor.
Set your water to boil in a small saucepan, so it's ready to use when you need it.
Combine the oil, sugar, molasses, and crystallized ginger. Add the eggs and whisk until smooth.

Sift together the flour, spices and salt together. Add wet mixture to the dry ingredients slowly until evenly combined.

Remove boiling water from heat and add baking soda. Brace for the foam. Rapidly incorporate this solution to the batter, and pour into pans.

Bake in the center of the oven until a toothpick inserted at the center comes out clean: a full pan will bake for 30-40 minutes, while muffins will run you anywhere from 15-20 minutes. Almonds will be perfectly toasted inside your batter.

Some people choose to top their gingerbread with whipped cream, ice cream, more candied ginger, lemon curd or even marmalade, but this fairytale gingerbread requires no embellishment.