

Non Plus Ultra

Continuing on the Hungarian path since my husband and brother-in-law are enjoying it and its a new world of unexplored pastries for me. This is why I love baking on an international scale. A country's pastry traditions tells so much about their history, their agriculture, their tastes and their culinary inheritance. With Egyptian desserts you see the French and Greek influences. Egyptians don't traditionally make meringue or shortbread. They use walnuts, hazelnuts, pistachios aplenty but no jam and rarely chocolate in the most authentic Egyptian pastries.

Hungarian pastries continue to surprise me. These shortbread cookies for example. They are so cute I just had to make them. At first I thought they would be similar to Linzer cookies but those little meringue hats add another dimension to the flavors. Also I added some lemon zest which made it fabulous. Take note that some recipes for non plus ultra bake them at 250F which was way too low for my oven and my first batch came out still raw after 45 minutes. It is not necessary to bake the meringues at so low of a temperature. You just have to watch them and pull them out when they start to get a little golden on the bottom of the cookie and before the meringue starts to brown.

Don't be intimidated by their fancy appearance they're actually quite easy to make.

280 gm all purpose flour

1 teaspoon lemon zest

1 teaspoon vanilla extract or, my preference – vanilla bean paste

250 gm unsalted butter at room temperature

3 egg yolks

pinch of salt

Meringue hats:

3 egg whites at room temperature

250 gm powdered sugar

pinch cream of tartar (optional, helps meringue form)

In the bowl of a stand mixer, combine flour and lemon zest. Add butter and vanilla and beat with the dough hook. Add egg yolks one at a time and continue to beat until dough is smooth. Divide the dough in two, wrap in saran wrap and chill for one hour.

Preheat oven to 300F. Line 2 cookie sheets with parchment paper or silpats.

Beat egg whites and cream of tartar at medium speed until foamy. Add powdered sugar and continue to beat until stiff peaks form, about 10 minutes. Fill piping bag with meringue and just snip the tip of the bag – no need for a piping tip – right before you are ready to pipe.

Roll out the dough on powdered sugar dusted surface to a 1/4" thickness. Cut out with 1 1/2" inch round or linzer cookie cutters and place on cookie sheets. Only re-roll out scraps once. If you're only able to bake one sheet at a time then place the other sheet in the fridge while its waiting. Pipe the meringue on each cookie with one fluid squeeze – not a beehive pattern. Bake at 300F for about 20 minutes but watch them. Pull them out when they are golden on the bottom of the cookie. Cool on racks and sandwich together with your favorite jam. Keep at room temperature for 2 weeks.

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