

HOME TWEET HOME

THINKING ABOUT MAKING A GINGERBREAD HOUSE THIS HOLIDAY BUT WANT TO BREAK OUT OF THE MOLD? *NJL H+B* COMMISSIONED PASTRY CHEF AND AWARD-WINNING ARCHITECT LESLIE DOWLING TO CREATE AN ORGANIC HOLIDAY DESSERT THAT IS GUARANTEED TO TURN HEADS.



by Patti Verbanas | *Photography by Jason Varney*



Leslie Dowling, owner of Three Tiers Cake Studio in Princeton, has never been one to settle for cliché, and she certainly rose to our challenge to design an iconoclastic holiday dessert for our readers.

Our other charge — that it be health-conscious — pointed her to that seasonal standard: gingerbread. “But the gingerbread house has been *done* — many, many times,” Dowling says. “We needed a fresh approach. I scoured my books and the Internet and did not find one gingerbread design that was a birdhouse and thought, *That’s perfect!*”

The fact that Dowling selected a residence for our dessert design is not a coincidence: The baker is also a practicing architect, who holds a master’s degree from Princeton University and worked with the venerable Michael Graves. Always intrigued by pastry’s sculptural forms, Dowling took a leave from her studio in 2009 to enroll in the Classic Pastry Arts program at the French Culinary Institute in New York City. The move was transformative as she found a definite synergy between the two disciplines, which both demand a keen eye for proportion and detailing. “Pastry is a form of architecture, simply using a different medium,” she explains.

Dowling, the architect, brings her clean modernist aesthetic to her cake designs, paring them down to their bare essence and celebrating the unembellished details; Dowling, the baker, sources local and organic ingredients for the healthiest recipes. “The nature of a gingerbread house is that there is not a lot of cake and the base ingredients are not overly rich,” she says, though she concedes that there is butter, which you can’t easily get around when making pastry. “It’s not a gingerbread house without some element of decoration. However, in lieu of all the artificial candy, I wanted to work with a more wholesome ingredient. The original German gingerbread recipes used marzipan, a ground almond and sugar paste, for the decorations. I sculpted the

Facing: Leslie Dowling’s Gingerbird House is a fresh take on a holiday tradition.

Top: Mise en place, mise en place, mise en place! Gather your ingredients before you start cooking or decorating.

Top, right: Make extra gingerbread for cookies that guests can take home.



birds, eggs, and flowers out of marzipan and painted branches on the birdhouse with a mixture of lemon juice and edible petal dust to give it a more natural, earthy, and elegant appearance.” Dowling sourced organic marzipan at bakingsuppliesstore.com and the organic and fresh-ground spices from the Whole Earth Center in Princeton and Whole Foods. She used organic dark chocolate for its heart-health properties and was inspired to incorporate coffee, another health powerhouse, into her recipe by Jennifer Linder McGlinn, author of *Gingerbread* (Chronicle Books, 2009).

When preparing this recipe, Dowling recommends setting aside enough time, even splitting up the process into two days, to give you time to concentrate and create without being rushed. “Making the dough and allowing it to thoroughly chill is important,” she says. “You want to be able to roll it out as thinly and evenly as possible. Once the baked gingerbread has cooled, it needs to be very even and hard so that it will stand up and the edges will line up with nice, clean seams.” She also advises having all the ingredients on hand before you start. “One of the most basic, yet important, things they told us at the French Culinary Institute was *mise en place*, *mise en place*, *mise en place*, which refers to reviewing your recipe fully and then gathering your ingredients, instruments, and tools and having them measured out, prepared, and sitting in front of you before you begin to cook. Running around collecting things as you’re cooking is a recipe for mistakes, and it’s inefficient.”

Most importantly, Dowling says, have fun with this design and make it your own. “Given the same basic kit of parts,” she says, “no two Gingerbird Houses are alike.”

Gingerbird House and Cookies

INGREDIENTS

- 6 cups all-purpose flour**
- 1¼ tsp baking soda**
- 2 tsp organic ground ginger**
- 2 tsp organic ground cinnamon**
- ¾ tsp organic ground cloves**
- ½ tsp organic nutmeg**
- 1 tsp fine salt**
- 1 cup (2 sticks) organic butter**
- 1¼ cups packed dark brown sugar**
- ¾ cup dark molasses**
- 1 tsp fresh organic ginger, grated**
- ½ tsp fresh organic lemon zest**
- ½ cup brewed espresso or strong coffee, mixed with ¼ cup water**
- ½ tsp fresh ground white pepper or pinch of cayenne pepper (optional)**

PROCEDURE

Whisk the dry ingredients together in a large bowl; set aside.

Using an electric mixer, cream the butter and brown sugar on medium speed until light and fluffy, scraping down sides of mixing bowl at least once. Add the molasses, fresh ginger, and lemon zest. Mix until thoroughly combined.

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Place cookies (left) around the Gingerbird House. Download templates (right) at njlhb.com. Lemon zest gives an added zing to Dowling's gingerbread cookies (facing).



On low speed, alternate adding the flour mixture and espresso to the creamed butter mixture, beginning and ending with the flour. Mix until thoroughly combined.

Turn dough out onto clean countertop and bring together, working any flour from the bottom of the mixing bowl thoroughly into dough. Divide into 2 portions and form into flat, square blocks. Wrap the dough blocks in plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 2 hours. (Dough can be made up to 3 days ahead of time.) Let dough sit at room temperature for at least 10 minutes before rolling out.

Preheat oven to 350° F.

Roll dough to 1/8 inch on lightly floured parchment paper to fit your sheet pan. Chill for 15 minutes after rolling for

cleanest cuts. Cut shapes from chilled dough using templates, reserving cutouts from circles for cookies. Cut more circle shapes from residual dough for cookies. Place cookies on separate sheet pan, as they will bake faster.

Bake in a 350° F oven until the edges are just beginning to darken, 12 to 15 minutes for the large pieces, 8 to 10 minutes for the small pieces. Rotate the cookie sheets half-way through the baking for more even browning. Remove the sheets to racks to cool, about 15 minutes.

Cookie Finishing Touches

INGREDIENTS

Lemon glaze (confectioners' sugar, thinned with lemon juice)
Crystallized ginger, finely minced (for dipping cookies)

Lemon zest sugar (for dipping cookies)

PROCEDURE

Make the lemon glaze and dip half of each cookie in the glaze, then dip in either the crystallized sugar or lemon zest sugar.

Royal Icing

INGREDIENTS

1 oz pasteurized liquid organic egg whites
1 1/2 cups 10x confectioners' sugar
1/2 tsp organic lemon juice (optional)
Brown food coloring (optional)

PROCEDURE

Add liquid egg whites in small amounts to confectioners' sugar and mix to achieve a stiff but fluid texture. Add small amount of lemon juice for flavor and more fluidity, if desired. To make seams virtually invisible, color with brown food coloring to match gingerbread hue. *